Dripping Fingers

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Teen And Up Audiences

Archive Warning:
No Archive Warnings Apply

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Harry Potter - J. K. Rowling

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Harry Potter/Tom Riddle

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Harry Potter, Tom Riddle, Hermione Granger, Ron Weasley, Petunia Evans Dursley, Dudley Dursley, Bartemius Crouch Jr., Hogwarts Students, Hogwarts Ghosts, Sirius Black

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Artist Harry Potter, Lonely Harry Potter, Tom Riddle's Diary, Possessive Tom Riddle, Oblivious Harry, Sad Harry Potter, no bashing of anyone, Canon-Typical Violence, Triwizard Tournament, a severe lack of Dobby, Redemption, Canonical Character Death, Tom Riddle Redemption, Tom Riddle is His Own Warning, Tom Riddle Has Feelings, Eventual Sane Tom Riddle, Angst, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Canon Compliant - Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone, Fluff and Angst, Tearjerker, If you read nothing else, Read chapter 16

Language:
English

Series:
Part 1 of Soul-Stained Masterpieces

Collections:
Yukikawa’s HP Bookshelf, i have seen your heart and it is mine, Harry Potter Favs, Storycatchers' pile of magical stories from the world of Harry Potter, Best HP Fanfics of All, Some Damn Well

Written Prose, Started stories, I wish I could read these for the first time, Stories That Deserve More, HP_ENG, great finds for the hp universe, Unique Harry Potter Fanfiction, Top-tier Tomarry, Incomplete Fics to Track, Platinum - HP, KJ's Favourite HP Fanfics That Made Them Lose Sleep, The Witch's Woods, 2421_Would_ReRead, The Fields of Elysium, WIP Excellence, Se eu perde-las, Wonderful_Worldbuilding_Fics, tomarry fics for the soul(ha), My Heart Is Yours Dearest Ray, The Overly Toasted Bagel Collection, My Favourites to read, Yo! Read This. Seriously., My Absolute Favorite □, ✧ Yer a great HP fic ✧, Fics I Could Read A Thousand More Times, Harry Potter and Heralds of Valdemar Fics That I Will Treasure Forever, Late Night Reads For Restless Spirits, SakurAlpha's Fic Rec of Pure how did you create this you amazing bean, Tomarry fics that are Good and I think you should read :), Cast pearls before swine, Harry Potter Favorite Fanfiction, Irreplaceablegems, wonderland, Ashes' Library, Tomarry \Harrymort, Amarillie Harry Potter Fanfictions, HPs I love, D20's Favorite Fics of All Time, ✧ Wizarding World Works ✧, Harry Potter Addictions, Pastels fics, Fanfics that Would be Best-Sellers if They Were Published Books, Jamie's Top Fics, Long Fics to Binge, HP revolution, Random Fandom Favorites, Precious Rare and Unique, Tomarryslash, my heart is here, ☆ Potterette's Neverland Treasure ☆, Fics so good I want to throw my chair out the window, fics to die for, The Best of HP, S-Rank Tomarry/Harrymort Fics, Wan Shi Tong's Spirit Library, Ongoing fic, Sheer Perfection says Mary Berry, Attendez_la_creme 🫖, Emma's Collection of Impeccable Work, Unfinished fics to come back to, Harry Potter | Bookshelf of Favourites | Rak, thiccboimork's harry potter reading list, thiccboimork's reading list, Fics to check for updates because otherwise my ADHD brain won't remember, Chibi's hoard for sleepless nights, HP works worth Reading Tom Centric, fics that hit the brain itch, Stories That Completely Took Over My Life, Lovely Legends of Long Length, Keeping an eye on these, Ongoing Fics to Keep an Eye On, HP stories I could read a thousand times⚡🩶⚡, Like A Favorite Sweater, THE 🎵 UBIQ □ ☠️ THE 🎭 UNIQUE 🪷, ZombieLove's Time Eaters, Harry Potter, Works I will reread when I inevitably forget everything but enjoying it, Harry Pottah Fics., WOO Insomnia Time, Top-Tier Complete Tomarrymort Fics, record scratch we shipping them now too?!, Truly a gem 💎, Tomarry works, ♥□ All-Time Favorites ♥□, Charlotte_HKcollections, HPStoriesForTheWin, ContosHP, hp fics for when I need my fix, The Golden Snitch Selection, Completed and Loved🩶😈, to binge read at any time of day but obvs 2am onwards is preferable, Harry Potter Fics I Do Adore, my favs :), GOD THIS WAS GOOD (and completed),

My recommendations/Rereads, one of the good HP fics, sleep deprivation never bothered me anyway or whatever elsa said, best of time travel/fix-its, Golden Fics for the Ages, I love you so, Genuinely_Amazing_Fics, Fics that fuelled my HP obsession, always to be read over and again, eat me drink me snort me read me, they made a vow their mother will be found, 💙ONLY THE BEST💙, The Foxy List, super cool and awsome works to show people, i'd give you a chance (if I had forever), The Crown Jewels, Rosealles Recs, HPCrossother, Harry Potter fics, HP((◍•ᴗ•◍)❤), Harry and Co, Гарри Поттер, Best of tomarry, hello yes i can't stop thinking about these works, HP Fanfics that I can actually follow along with even tho idk anything abt the series, Better Potter than the books, Harry Potter Sauce, My absolute favourite fics, oh dear GODDDD these harry potter au fics were to DIE for, Tomarry AU's, Nothingsweeterthanmybaby, Noa's TBR, Baz's Favorites, Harry Potter, fics that keep me awake at night☕, Fanfic Is My Life, Best Completed Stories, Stories I Read Again and Again, Harry Potter Fics I'd Crucio to Be Canon, Crow's Readables, Fics That I Like ✨, ＜33, Mark's Top Fanfic Recs, G's List of works to Read, Lux's fav fics, Fics I've Finished (x5F), My Personal Favorites, Harry Potter, Read Again They Were Good (clayrin), Favourite other ships, For Feeling Everything, Finished Works, Finished Works – Harry Potter, FicsThatMakeMeWantToKickMyDoorOpenAndScreamAtTheWorld, Tomarry Supremacy , Shards of Emerald💚, 🔵 **Dark Matter** 🔵, Library of 3am Thoughts and Meditations, Fics that made my day, Best most mouth watering fics I can actually stand to reread, HP works that make you wave like an excited Italian, Harry Potter Bests, HP fics my love, Finished golden ones, Love to reread! , Captivating Fics That Cause Insomnia, favourite fics of all time: a medley, The_wand_choses_the_wizard, Harry Potter, Works that are worth the reread, MaloleeHP, Works That Have Left A Permanent Mark Upon My Soul, Long stories I'd die for, Favorite Works Over The Years, My Favourite Fanfics, E is for Epic, Always

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Dripping Fingers

by May_May_0_0

Summary

When Harry finds Tom Riddle's diary he does not write 'Hello.' He does not write anything at all. He draws. Tom Riddle falls in love with the artwork.

———————

Sketch by sketch, drawing by drawing, the ink Harry pours into the diary manifests as creations in Tom's monochrome world.

- Translation into 中文-普通话 國語 available: 【授翻】Dripping Fingers 沿著指尖滴落 by Obol_of_Charon
- Translation into Polski available: Dripping Fingers by Kijrko
- Translation into Українська available: Dripping Fingers (Скрапувати з кінчиків пальців) by kroha

Abandon

Chapter Notes

Thank you so much to Interconfluence for beta-ing this work!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It starts with an abandoned, dripping book. Harry finds it half flushed down the toilet. Someone's name remains on the diary's cover. Someone gave up on their dreams, left their ambitions all alone, tried to ruin them instead of nurturing them and letting them grow.

As much as Harry tries (oh how he tries) to play the hero, he knows he is not so different from this diary. (abandoned) He remembers the words of his "relatives," the note of disappointment in Aunt Petunia's voice that she has to keep him, his no-good parents drunk and leaving him all on his own with no one to love him.

His parents are war heroes, he reminds himself in the dead of night when the pain of loneliness crushes all his hopes of happiness. They gave their lives for him. *They died for me, but dying is easy. Why couldn't they LIVE for me?* (Abandoned.)

So Harry picks up the book and dries it with a towel instead of his wand. He knows it is irrational to treat the diary as though it is precious, as though it is touch-deprived and in need of affection ... but Harry *is*. Harry is in desperate need of gentle touch; he thinks that 'Tom Marvolo Riddle,' whoever he may be (or may have been) would have wanted a gentle touch too.

The pages of the diary are blank. Perhaps the ink washed clean off. Perhaps the abandoner never decided to write. (Given up on before your first words)

Harry wants to say something ... only, he doesn't want to write. He's

been doodling on the back of discarded receipts and stray bits of paper since he was barely able to speak. He's wanted somewhere to allow his images to connect to parchment, to spread out across a blank canvas and colour a white world into magic. He wants to feel a pen in his hand like a wand in his palm, capable of creation like gods.

So he does not write 'Hello' on the blank page of the diary. He does not write anything at all.

He draws.

He draws the whomping willow and the trunk that twists and rages. He draws the violent branches and the scraping leaves and he can almost hear the wounded pride of the wind as it sails between the tree's boughs. He can taste the bitterness of the wood, smell the musk of sodden bark. He can feel loneliness and at first, it does not matter because he thinks the loneliness is his own ... but then he remembers the tree. A lonely, violent tree, pushing everyone away because it is so afraid it will be left alone. (Abandoned.)

When he looks down at the page of the diary, the page that had been so empty not so long ago, he feels something new flare in his chest. *Pride*. The whomping willow looks real, black lines casting shadows and twisting with a hint of motion. It's as if just a bit of his magic has gone into the parchment to bring his sketch to life.

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Tom Marvolo Riddle stares down at the book in his hand with no small amount of surprise. When he went into the diary, he had imagined that he would be asleep. He instead found himself in a pale imitation of Hogwarts, (only the parts he remembered) ... he found around the edges, the castle faded into Wool's. He is trapped in a dreamland made of a nightmare, alone in a castle devoid of color. He holds a book that looks like the diary and no matter where he leaves it in his dreamscape, it always finds itself in his hands the moment

someone writes to him. They write from back up There, in the world Tom cannot help but hope is still real.

So he listens to the people who pour out their hearts to him. He waits until he can take their souls too. Tom Marvolo Riddle is many things, but he has waited for over five decades in a barren wasteland of his own ambition. He will not be forgotten. He will not be abandoned.

The girl, Ginny, talked about her crush (a boy worth looking into, killing his living self as a baby, most disquieting) and her own feelings of inadequacy. She is a diamond in the rough, Tom knows. Her soul is tantalizing, her magic strong. But her mind, her mind is so very weak. Tom has enjoyed breaking it.

“I’m going mad Tom.”

Are you? How very sad.

'The transition to boarding school is very hard Ginny. It’s perfectly normal.'

“Tom, I woke up with blood on my robes.”

Oh, poor thing. That was my fault, wasn’t it?

“I’m sorry, Ginny. I’m a bit squeamish about girl stuff. Maybe go see the school nurse?”

“Tom, Tom, Tom, Tom--”

Do be quiet, Ginny! Nobody cares about you.

'I'm here, my dear. No need to fret.'

But then she stops writing from up There, that infernal weak-minded girl. He is left in the lavatory. Half flushed. (Abandoned.)

He is picked up again. Picked up by a boy, not much older than the girl, simply brimming with magic. He is dried by hand and it feels like a gentle caress. The dungeons within the shadow Hogwarts warm almost imperceptibly.

Tom opens the book. He waits. He waits for the first word to appear. It is almost always 'Hello.'

He waits and sees the first splatter of ink, only it does not form a *word* at all. It slowly curves and lengthens to form a trunk, then dances to fashion blades of grass, then jumps to sketch out branches and leaves, and --

Tom can *hear* the wind.

For reasons he cannot understand he goes up out of his shadow dungeons and past the skeleton of his memory out onto the field that is blank in perpetual winter. And impossibly *right there*, growing on the frozen ground is the tree being drawn in his book. Formed of ink, the tree sways ever so slightly in a gentle breeze. The book cools, alerting Tom that the artist has finished his work. And, astonishingly, (impossibly, perhaps even more than the tree), Tom wants to hold on to this message. He always discards what the people write to him, never of any consequence. But this tree is powerful and new, and

angry, and ... lonely. Like him.

He presses one hand to the page of the diary and one hand to the inky ghost of the tree in front of his chest. The tree from the book draws into one palm, flows up the vein on his wrist, dying it black, and then through his heart and out his other palm and ... the ink-tree solidifies and becomes a tree of wood. One of the branches tickles Tom above his left rib.

His hands drip with ink the color of midnight but he cannot gather the desire to care.

He absorbs the beauty of the tree, the first tree that is not a ghost of memory in this shell of a world ...

He feels the blossom of a new desire.

Tom does not want to destroy the soul on the other side of this book. The beautiful soul that gave him a tree is not a soul destined for destruction. It is a soul glowing with the magic of creation. It is glorious and it is *Tom's*. They will not be (abandoned).

Chapter End Notes

Good news, folks! I have read your comments and decided this is worth continuing. It's fun to write :)

Heart-Work

Chapter Summary

Harry draws a fixture from his childhood, Tom and Harry meet for the first time

Chapter Notes

WAAAAA I cannot believe the response the first chapter got! I decided (due to overwhelming encouragement) to continue this into a full story! I'll probably update every 7-14 days

Thank you to everyone and please leave a comment!

Thanks again to Interconfluence for beta-ing this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry's always thought hearts can be expressed as artwork. Most people have hearts composed of ink: sharp edges and clear, dark lines sketched on pristine paper. Some people have hearts made of paint: brilliant colors swirling together in a cacophony of movement, reminiscent of life and magic.

Snape has a heart made of pottery, jagged and broken, thrust into fire once, polished, and then made beautiful by burning again in an inferno. Ron has a heart made of glass-blown sculpture: vibrant and whimsical, fragile and in danger of shattering. Hermione's heart is carved marble, her beliefs are etched into the fabric of unyielding stone. Dumbledore... his is a heart of tapestry: stories are woven and unraveled, spools of thread tangle, are cut open and retreat. Dumbledore's heart is beautiful to look at, but it is embroidered by the skilled hands of a liar.

Harry thinks his heart must be made of graphite.

His heart is a faint thing. It's smudged in every corner, fingerprints stain all the wrong places, every attempt to fix his mistakes inevitably leads to a bleeding mess. Harry's heart is erasable in theory, but every

attempt only dirties the eraser; the paper is left cracked and brittle with days old smudges spreading ever outwards. He is no masterpiece. He's relentlessly inconsistent. In some places, his heart beats with gentle stokes made of featherlight sketch marks, in other places, shards of broken lead lay stranded on angry jabs of grey. Graphite is impermanent, yet Harry knows somehow that his heart must be (or *will be*) eternal. He hopes his heart (the real part, the part he hasn't met yet) is buried somewhere far beneath that graphite, back on the pure, unblemished paper, and he's just waiting to find the right medium to color himself in.

Number Four, Privet Drive was full of three perfectly normal people, thank you very much, each with hearts made of ink. There was one little boy of graphite hidden beneath their stairs. Harry had thought he was all alone, was one of a kind ... A (freak) child with no one who could ever understand. Being told about the magical world was a relief, even if Hagrid's heart was just as inky as those of Harry's relatives. Surely at least *one* wizard would understand. He would find someone like him at Hogwarts, someone just as grey and lonely. (Maybe they could color each other in with a mixture of paints and crystals and brilliant fire.)

He was disappointed.

At Hogwarts, Harry learned he was more alone than ever before. So he became a chameleon, smudged himself to fit in, tried to play the role he was assigned before he even knew his name. Harry played the hero to a tee his first year, but he wanted more than anything to learn how to use magic for his artwork. He wanted to *build* , not charm feathers to fly. Why turn a mouse (a perfectly respectable mouse) into a snuff box for just a few hours? *He* wanted to learn magic to *create* the snuffbox, magic to craft an engraved button instead of borrowing off a beetle. (He still did well in transfiguration. McGonagall always exclaimed over his exquisite designs.) Harry buried his desire to create beneath his desire to fit in, his true heart sinking lower and lower beneath the dull graphite.

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Harry draws in the diary with tears sliding down his cheeks. One day ago, he accidentally talked to a snake to protect Justin Finch-Fletchley, and ever since, the school has called him a ‘Dark Lord,’ sent hexes at his back, and told him that he’s *not welcome* .

Hermione’s worried about him.

(How are you, Harry?

-I’m fine-

You always say you’re fine. It’s not healthy to keep everything bottled up like this.

-I’m not-

Not *what* ?

-Not bottling it all up. I’ve been drawing-

Oh… Well, that’s good. Healthy, even... How long have you been drawing?

-A long time-

Oh...

Can I see them, your drawings?)

Harry doesn't know if he wants Hermione to see. His art is a piece of his soul. The scraps of parchment he's saved from first year are important to him , but they're not all that impressive. He's proud of his willow from three days ago, but it feels like a friend ... one who is all for Harry. He doesn't have people who care for him and *him alone* . He isn't sure he wants to share.

Harry is drawing before he sees what he has begun to sketch.

It's his cupboard, the one under the stairs. He can tell already because he's drawn a flickering lightbulb shrouded in welcoming darkness. He's huddled on his four-poster bed, the curtains drawn all around him in an attempt to make the small space even smaller. He's trying to feel like he does when he's in his cupboard.

As Harry sketches, he begins to calm. He fashions the dingy cot in one corner, small little specks that look just like spiders, and bolts on the door which can only be unlocked from the outside. The cupboard feels like safety to him. No one can hurt him when he's in there: Aunt Petunia's too tall, Vernon and Dudley too fat. He doesn't have to see anyone judge him while he's enveloped in the cupboard's darkness. He can smile at the spiders and listen to the stairs creak. It's far better in there than out in the house, where he has to hear about his own alleged inadequacies from the people who were supposed to be his family.

When Harry's finished with his rendition of the cupboard, he begins to feel indescribable anguish. It looks *wrong* to him. He knows it is *not* normal to keep a little boy under the stairs (although when Harry's ever been normal is unclear), and he hates this is the place that makes him feel safe. He wants his cupboard to have been bigger ... brighter, *warmer*. He wants it to be a place he can feel proud of and say 'this here is *mine'*.

His hands are still in motion. His pen darts and licks the paper. He draws flames … and they curl at the walls and lap at the locks. A fire that illuminates the recess under the stairs, and makes the small space seem so much bigger than it ever was in reality.

And though his pen strokes were laden with heartbreak, the fire ... the *fire* is only beautiful. It moves on his page though he has long since finished drawing, forging patterns of darkness in contrast to the light it emanates, making the book Harry clutches feel cozy with phantom warmth.

He realizes he's stopped crying.

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Tom Riddle is sitting with his back to the new tree, looking out at the still lake. The lake water never feels wet, only reflects the grey sky, and stays devoid of motion. It is the mere *memory* of a place, not the reality. Tom has not felt sunshine in over five decades. The ground in the diary is frozen, yet he does not feel cold either. He is simply… numb. Nothing feels real in the world of the diary. Sometimes, Tom thinks that nothing *is* real (not even *him*).

But the tree… the tree *is* real. It is **alive** . There is no other word for it. The tree is **solid** against Tom's back in a grounding kind of a way. Tom has been drifting for so long, and he only noticed the dissociation for its absence. He can *think* with his back against the tree. He can look at the twisting branches and let them block the grey expanse of 'sky'.

Tom has not put down the diary for three days now, waiting waiting *hoping* (and has he ever hoped before? Tom cannot remember) for his artist to draw him something new. Anything to break up the monotony of this partial existence.

Tom feels the diary warm. A grin breaks out on his face. It is an undignified expression, but who is there to see?

As before, he can feel a kind of *pull* to where he needs to go. He heads back into the castle, passes the hospital wing and into a back room, and here he loses his recollection of Hogwarts... the world fades into a landscape of Wool's orphanage.

He stands in the dilapidated living room, his nose scrunching in disgust at the moth-bitten couches. He ignores the molding kitchen, the chipped dining room table, the second floor full of closed doors (locked all of them save one), and his own, desolate room (at the end of the hall) occupied by only a wardrobe full of stolen items. Tom considers it a small mercy he did not end up with Billy Stubb's rabbit hung from the rafters above the stairwell.

Tom focuses on the diary, trying to determine what in the name of Merlin his artist could possibly be drawing in the *orphanage* . On the page, ink spreads outwards, sad and dripping. Tom glances out the window and finds... **rain** . He blinks. It has never rained in this world before.

Tom exits the front door of the orphanage, inhaling deeply and turning his face upwards to the sky. He ignores the space outside which is made of what he saw during the summers spent in muggle London; he has no interest in reliving the bombs and their aftermath, no matter how steadfastly attached to his dreamland they may be. He ignores the sight of rubble, instead opening his mouth to catch a drop of water on his tongue.

The water droplets taste real and wet as they slide down his throat. They are a treasure. They are also *salty* . Tom recognizes the flavor. They must be… tears. Tom gulps them down greedily, as though they are holy. *The first taste of my artist.*

When the rain (tears) ends, Tom goes back into the orphanage with watermarked clothes. He casts no drying spell and revels in the feeling of being wet; it is something he has not felt in far too long. The diary is once more cold in his hands -- the artwork is complete.

There, beneath the stairs, a new cupboard has built itself into his reality. It looks as though it belongs, this strange new cupboard with too many locks on the outside, but Tom knows it was never a part of Wool's. This is not *his* demon, but one belonging to his artist. Tom lays a palm against the door of the cupboard, the other resting atop the cover of his diary. He notices that this time he can *feel* the ink from the world above pass through him, turned into reality down in this place, his world devoid of time. He feels like he is a medium, like he is a wand… He is a pen, and this world is nothing more than paper. If his artist is a creator, Tom is the tool he wields.

Tom unlocks the door to the cupboard cautiously and looks inside. There is one small mattress on the floor, a spider (Tom has not seen life for five decades so the spider is both fascinating and surprising), and a flickering light bulb. It *should* be unremarkable, and yet, in the center of the small space is a flame.

The flame does not burn but illuminates, and though Tom is an atheist at best, he feels as though he is Moses, standing before the burning bush. He wants nothing more than to worship this new creation. The fire feels warm on his face. It takes away his numbness, making him feel soft heat all the way down to his bones.

Without conscious thought, he moves towards the flames. Tom wants to reach out a hand and see what would happen if he could just touch it… just *touch* ...

A soft sniffle causes Tom to drop his hand.

There, on the bed (if you could even call the paper-thin mattress such a thing) Tom had thought was empty, sits a little boy. He looks young, perhaps around ten, and his hair is a mop of flyaway black. His skin is pale -- *too* pale -- and from where his head is bowed over, Tom can see the beginning ridges of his spine.

There has never been another living creature in Tom's world since he found himself trapped, and there has certainly never been another *human.* That one is here now, in this genesis of hand-crafted reality, cannot be a coincidence . He schools his expression into one of concern and kneels before the little boy. Tom places a gentle hand on the boy's shoulder, causing him to look up; he stares into eyes greener than emeralds, flickering with warm light reflected by the fire. The boy has wide, vulnerable eyes, a small red nose, and trembling puffy lips. *Simply adorable.*

"And who are *you* ?" Tom asks in a teasing tone.

He ruffles the boy's hair, who leans into the touch.

"I'm Harry," The boy says.

Harry? What a normal name for such a treasure.

"But you should know that."

Tom raises a brow, and begins running his fingers through Harry's hair. "Why is that, Harry?"

Harry shrugs. “This is *my* dream. You’re in *my* cupboard.”

Tom stills for a moment before he resumes petting Harry’s soft locks. *Your cupboard? So you **are** my artist. I thought so. Precious.*

Tom’s hand travels down the side of Harry’s head, pushes some strands away from the boy’s forehead and behind his ear, before coming to rest at the nape of his neck. One finger slowly traces and re-traces a path along Harry’s spine. The boy shudders and lets out a sigh of contentment.

Touch starved, are you precious?

Smiling like the Cheshire Cat, Tom gently taps Harry’s nose with his free hand. Then he rests the hand on the younger boy’s cheek, rubbing soothing circles on the soft skin.

“Hello, Harry,” he says tenderly, “ I’m Tom.”

Chapter End Notes

Ahahaha do you think our boys are destined for a happy ending?

They certainly have a melancholy beginning

What is your heart made out of? (Personally, I think my heart is a water-color landscape)

Regret

Chapter Summary

Tom Riddle is no longer Voldemort. He is... changing

Ginny is acting strange

Chapter Notes

Well folks, thanks for buttering my toast with all these fabulous comments and kind kudos. I love them all so much.

Today begins the main storyline. I will be going through all the next years of Harry's schooling but things will be different than they were the first time around because Harry and Tom are very different.

Shout out to sweet_dark_silence in this chapter, your request has been heard and delivered :)

Thank you again to interconfluence for beta-ing this chapter

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Regret . Lord Voldemort does not regret. Lord Voldemort is transcendent, powerful, a god among paltry men. He makes choices with perfect clarity. He is infallible.

Tom Riddle has not been Lord Voldemort for over 50 years.

He has *learned* ... regret.

Isolation with only one's own thoughts for company provides the perfect landscape for self-reflection. In the beginning, the part of Tom that won (the little lord Above) would write to him in the diary; they would converse, craft plans, gloat over their shared victory in denying death their life.

Even as Tom revelled in the feeling of achievement with his other half, a gnawing feeling was growing ever stronger in the back of his mind. *Something went wrong.*

Tom denied himself those wonderings, waiting for words to appear in his diary. Once held daily, conversations with his other self dwindled until they were held only weekly. The distraction of those weekly writings on Voldemort's progress Above were enough to keep out doubt. They had to be. (They were not enough.)

When Voldemort (was he really a lord, that greedy man Above?) told Tom he was making a second Horcrux, Tom knew (he *knew* because he was not so different from who he used to be) what Voldemort wanted to hear. Praise.

He did not give it.

"You do not understand." Tom had said.

What do I not understand? Voldemort's writing was elongated and grotesque compared to Tom's practiced calligraphy. Something so fundamental about him had... changed.

Privately, Tom thought Voldemort needed to learn patience, learn avarice was as dangerous as love. Both emotions were all-consuming — they both lead to whims that superseded logic. The slippery slope upon which the two Riddles had begun to slide (the two of them who were never meant to be separated), could only lead to downfall. Power was nothing in the face of insanity. Incorrectly wielded, fire burns the caster.

"Horcruxes. I am full of aspects of who we used to be, full of the qualities you left behind. Lost. You cannot take the chance by making

even one more. You will lose yourself entirely."

Tom had felt the anger then — the horrible, violent anger that used to build behind his eyes when faced with the foolishness of adults charmed by a smile, the greed of little boys who knelt before their lord, the hatred housed in the manic grins of dirty orphans who did not (could not) understand **him** .

The rage boiling above the surface of Tom's grey sky was not his own. *This is what makes Him Voldemort.*

I am not Lord Voldemort. Not anymore.

The last time Voldemort had written Tom was just over fifty years ago. The words written were full of detestation for his own soul.

I will not let your covetous tendencies deny me my conquests.

Tom laughed then. A horrible, bitter laugh. He hoped the man Above could taste the sour flavor on his tongue.

"We were many things when we were one person. We were cruel, powerful, ambitious. We were vicious. Never foolish. And *you* ... you are now the fool."

Voldemort never read those words. He never responded, never opened their diary again.

Tom felt it when the second Horcrux was made, then the third, and a

fourth… now they number six. He tried to imagine what monster had been forged in the distorted destruction of their once unblemished soul. The man left Above must surely be little more than a wraith, less himself than the Tom he left behind.

Trapped in the diary, staring out at the empty landscape, never sleeping, never eating, never hearing his own heartbeat, (that tempo was lost in the wind that would never blow), he filled up with self-reproach for his foolish actions. He learned it trapped in his eternal solitude, wallowed in it for decades of his directionless existence... he learned regret.

Tom was not dead. Would not ever die. They had succeeded, he and the man Above. Vol-de-mort. Flight of death. And Tom, Tom had not paid attention to the price. He was not dead.

He was *not* **alive**.

More than Tom wanted to escape death (for is immortality worth anything, when your heart will not beat, when your breaths do not fill your lungs... when your mind is incapable of dreaming?), he wanted ***life*** . He wanted to *live* , with a vibrance rivalling the deepest blue of the midnight summer skies at Hogwarts, and he wanted to use his renewed life to **destroy** the abomination of himself left in the world Above.

And is that not regret, wanting to kill the person you have become?

***

Harry doesn't know how, doesn't try to understand how, but sometimes he can sense emotions. He feels them twist and writhe and unfurl in the space around his heart. These emotions (the ones that

pulse to a foreign drumbeat, the ones that invade the cavity of his chest until he can't *breathe*), they don't belong to him. But they are *about* him. Someone else's emotions are transposed onto the already filled canvas of his soul.

His dreams, not unlike these pulses of distant feelings from foreign sources, have begun to seem as though they belong to someone else. He falls asleep and wakes up nightly with a boy in Slytherin green robes and perfectly styled hair, held in a warm embrace, talks to the boy who is clearly brilliant and even more obviously lonely. He calls himself Tom. Harry often wonders if he's somehow entering the dreams of the boy who first owned the sketch diary.

He is sitting in the Gryffindor common room, sketching in his diary and absorbing warmth from the dying fire. He curls up in a golden armchair and allows his fingers to fly and fill the blank page with a field of flowers. A smile is playing on his lips. Hermione is telling Ron something while Ron tries to ignore her; they're both sitting together on a couch across from Harry. There's a camaraderie between them that goes beyond words. It's happened slowly, but as Harry's begun spending more and more time drawing in his diary, (he's drawn the night sky and the shining moon, a chocolate frog escaping through a window, his broomstick lying against one wall, this very common room… an empty swing set from Privet Drive) the more Hermione and Ron have come to understand he likes the quiet.

It used to be Harry, Ron and Hermione. Now Harry is himself, and Ron and Hermione have become a unit. They're all still friends, perhaps even better friends than before, but Harry learns so he can create, whereas Ron and Hermione… they learn so they can do magic. It's not quite the same.

Now Ron and Hermione understand, at least a little, that Harry doesn't want to be a hero. He will be if he *has* to, but he would rather sketch in his diary, rather some day colour the world into dazzling beauty. Ron and Hermione look at Harry and decide they hope he doesn't have to be the boy-who-lived on a battlefield. They decide they like it when his fingers fly across the page. Hermione loves whenever Harry allows her to see one of his drawings and, really, they are so (unbelievably) brilliant she cannot imagine him being anything other than an artist. Ron looks at one drawing of boats on the great lake and feels echoes of loneliness, of hope for freedom, and thinks 'this boy is not meant to be a soldier. This art feels as important (more important) than war'. Ron doesn't know what to do with these thoughts, but he still thinks them. And Harry... Harry feels *seen* for the

first time. He is learning *joy* .

And then his breath leaves him in a sudden rush. Like a maggot worming its way through his core, he feels tendrils of jealousy and anguish rush up his spine. The emotions are sick and twisted. Harry looks away from the page.

He feels a hot breath against his neck. Right in front of him, perched on the armrest of his chair, sits little Ginny Weasley. Her hair is red (so red) — it outshines the Gryffindor house-color. Her eyes are molten chocolate, glassy as melted wax. She should be sweet, she should be cute, but all she seems is sick and cloying.

“Are you writing to someone, Harry?” She asks.

Harry looks at Ron for help (*this is your sister* his eyes say, but Ron just shrugs).

“Hullo, Ginny,” Harry says after a small pause. “I’m actually drawing right now.” (Harry doesn’t have anyone to write letters to. Aunt Petunia would probably burn them.)

Ginny narrows her eyes. It is an odd look on a face so young. It is full of suspicion.

“Can I see?” she asks.

Her face is full of envy as she focuses on the diary. Harry feels like he is being stripped down into nothingness. Everything about this interaction, about Ginny herself, seems terribly off. There’s a disease here. It is infecting her.

Harry brings the diary into her view and slowly flips through his drawings. He's bookmarked the pages filled with images of his childhood, so he deftly (too quick to notice) skips those pages as he shows her his work.

Her eyes widen, and the pressing against his spine falls away all at once. She looks confused and sad, and then her eyes are filled with only wonder.

"Harry," she breathes, "these are amazing."

There's color in her cheeks now. Harry hadn't realized it was previously absent until now.

"Erm. Thank you, I guess," he says.

Ginny nods. "Of course. You've got real talent. I think you could be famous!"

Her eyes hold no mockery, but Harry and Ron laugh simultaneously.

"Ginny," Ron says, "he *is* famous. You know, the boy-who-lived?"

Ginny blushes bright red. "Maybe, but... I mean, *this* is different. He could be famous for his art."

Harry smiles at the thought. "I'd like that."

Ginny gives him a small smile in return. All of a sudden, that wave of sickness comes rolling back. She looks at him then, and her eyes are filled with unbridled longing.

“Does it ever write back?” she asks.

“What?”

“The diary. Does it ever write back?”

Harry shook his head. “Why would it write back? It’s a diary.” He’s silent for a moment. “Were you writing in something? Something that was writing back?”

Ginny is blushing red again, almost as red as her hair, and now Hermione is looking up with concern. “Were you, Ginny?” she asks. “That’s really bad. Can you remember where it is?”

“Remember what Dad says, don’t trust anything if you can’t see where it keeps its brain!” Ron adds in a somewhat condescending tone.

“N-no, I—” Ginny is breathing quickly “—I just thought — but it isn’t — and, and I’m fine, so —” Ginny cuts off and runs out of the common room.

Harry looks after her. He relaxes when her emotional turmoil seems to be focused away from him. Once she’s gone, he turns to his friends. “That was weird, right? It’s not just me?”

Hermione purses her lips. “No, Harry. It’s not just you.”

***

The first time Tom rejects one of Harry’s drawings is also the last time he rejects one. But it *is* the first time he writes to his artist. He feels the diary warm and looks down with trepidation at what his artist will build for him.

The gifts he has received, these last few months in Harry’s company, have reminded Tom of how it felt when he was alive. He has seen the night sky again, felt the rushing of the wind once more. He has even been to the Gryffindor common room for the first time: It was… warm. Garish, but warm. *Of course Harry would be a Gryffindor. It takes bravery to share art.*

Tom’s favourite new piece of his world is a boat not unlike the one he rode in his first night at Hogwarts.

When it appeared on the banks of the lake, polished wood reflecting the moon Harry had hung in his sky, Tom knew then that one day, he would breathe again. Because there, where the boat was mirrored in the depths of the lake, was *water.* True water.

Tom stepped into the boat and allowed his hand to skim beneath the surface of the waves. He brought it out, dripping, and then left the boat entirely to swim. He swims every day now, in the lake that is more blue than it was before, in the water that is real and no longer mere memory. He feels as though he has been baptized by a purity unlike any he has ever felt.

He wonders, not for the first time, if he has finally found his "enough." (It still is not, can never be enough.)

So when Tom felt a pull to the greenhouse, he was excited. Harry gave him plants before, mostly flowers and a few trees. They decorated the lonely field, turning the barren landscape into a lush paradise. And then... Tom heard the wailing.

A mandrake.

Harry was drawing him mandrakes. They were useful, yes, especially against petrification (but Tom had already closed the chamber — nothing would hurt his Harry, not even his pet. He could take no chances) and Tom was unable to be harmed or make potions here, not in the diary.

Unlike with Harry's other drawings, Tom did not save the work; instead, he watched it fade away. Then, he opened his diary and retrieved a pen. Never had he written first, but… this was his artist.

"Really, Harry — mandrakes?" he wrote in perfect, flowing strokes.

After that, the diary was cold for two days. No drawings.

Harry still comes in his dreams.

Who are you? are the first words he gets back in the diary. The handwriting is atrocious chicken scratch. He can feel Harry's fear and, buried, his excitement. Tom smiles sharply. Harry must not have thought his art was going anywhere. He could hardly have known the Tom in his dreams was manacled within the diary. He would now.

“I’m Tom, Harry. We spend so many nights together, you and I.”

Did you write to Ginny?

Who was Ginny? Ah. The infernal girl who was in love with his artist. Tom’s mouth curled with distaste.

“Who is Ginny, Harry? Your girlfriend?”

What? No.

Good. She does not deserve you.

She’s my best friend’s little sister.

Tom glowered. “I thought I was your best friend.”

I didn’t know you were real.

***

That night, Harry is nestled in Tom’s arms on his bed in the Slytherin dormitories. At first, the bed seemed to mock Tom, comfortable linens fit for sleep that would not come. Recently, he has been grateful for it. He holds Harry many nights like this, with the younger boy between his legs, his precious back resting against Tom’s chest. He sits with his

arms wrapped around Harry's waist; resting his chin atop Harry's head, he kisses the black tousled tresses.

"Do you really not know Ginny Weasley?" Harry asks at last.

I know no one so well as I know you. "I have not met her before. I've been trapped here for over fifty years, Harry."

"Oh," Harry says. He sounds disappointed.

Trying to sound nonchalant, Tom asks, "Do you love her?"

Harry sighs. "No. I might grow to love her brother and Hermione... one day."

"Love makes you weak, Harry. It is not necessary."

"Why do you think love makes you weak?"

"Attachments can be exploited. People forgo logic for the people they love, and hurt themselves in the process. It takes away reason. *That* is weakness."

Harry breathes again; Tom takes comfort in his artist's steady heartbeat. He tightens his arms around the boy's smaller form.

"I don't think love makes you weak, Tom," Harry whispers.

For some reason, Tom's mouth goes dry. "Why not, Harry?"

"People need people. That's life. And life's not worth living all alone. We need people to love so we can love ourselves, I think. For our lives to be worthwhile. There's no point in having power if you've not got anyone to protect it with, no happiness to gain from it."

"Do you have people who love you, Harry?"

"I did, once. And one day, I hope to be loved again."

Tom leans down and kisses Harry's forehead. He feels something foreign building in his chest, something glowing but uncontrollably sad. In parseltongue, he hisses, *"I would kill for you."*

It is the truth. Tom would burn the whole world away for Harry.

Harry shivers. Tom imagines he will ask what was just said, or ignore the hissing and not realize it is a language at all, like so many of the inane muggle-borns with whom he attended classes.

Instead, he is responded to in the tongue of the snakes: *"I would not want that from you."*

Tom looks down at the miracle in his arms, and feels something he has not felt before. He feels… fond. It goes beyond that even... **Affection.**

Lord Voldemort does not feel affection. Lord Voldemort is an island fortress with walls the height of mountains and a solitude self-imposed. He has no need for any connections.

Tom Riddle has not been Lord Voldemort for over 50 years.

He smiles into the hair of the boy in his arms. He has learned *affection*.

He does not regret.

Chapter End Notes

Well, that was plot, I think. How did it go? Leave a comment and let me feel what you feel. In a not creepy way, of course.

(We'll leave that to Tom)

Inheritance

Chapter Notes

I can't believe I've gotten 1,000+ Kudos. Thank you so much guys. Keep em coming if you'd like XD

I am still hoping to keep updating every 7-14 days, so you should expect between 2 and 3 new chapters per month

In other news, I just moved from California to Nashville and my old city was on fire the day I left and continues to burn. What is 2020? My beta-reader is from Scotland, and it's flooding there. If only Scotland could send California its rain.

Stay safe out there folks, the world may be trying to kill us with floods, fire, and disease, but we are strong and mighty.

PSA: Like this work? Check out my other one, "Another Mindgame." It is more light-hearted and action-packed than "Dripping Fingers" and follows the tone of the books. Ever wonder what might have happened if the Dursleys had been more abusive than in canon and Snape saw memories during occlumency lessons? Wonder no more! GO, check it out. Lots of people have found it to be a fun read. Chances are, you will too!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It is an offhand comment that changes the scope of Harry's world. He's been existing as a clear pond, his surface a perfect reflection of blue sky and algae swaying softly in the current beneath the calm, unbroken waters. The comment is a single pebble, tossed carelessly and skipping twice before sinking slowly down to tangle amongst the water grown weeds. The stone left behind makes ripples and waves in concentric circles, patterns that grow and collide, are broken and... *transform* the once calm pond into a chaotic masterpiece of movement.

He's begun taking the diary with him everywhere he goes because inspiration strikes at the oddest times. He can hold onto his revelations of creation as easily as he can catch a moonbeam in his hand; he needs to start drawing immediately after an image arrives in his mind or else it slips away like radiant light shimmering through the flickering mist and erased by the dawn.

People notice.

They always notice Harry Potter, of course. He hates that people look at him, hates the way they follow him, but he doesn't so much hate how more and more members of the castle will lean over his shoulder as he sketches, complimenting his little drawings until he is red in the face and his work long finished.

At breakfast, the Gryffindor table passes around the diary, and his housemates exclaim over the new worlds he crafted during the night. Whenever Harry goes to the library, students needing study breaks leaf through the sketches and let out sighs of contentment. When he plays Quidditch, he leaves the diary with Hermione, who looks over the pages lovingly and sometimes laughs and sometimes cries, and sometimes sits biting her lip and looking up at the sky.

Harry comes down from brushing the clouds with his fingertips, holding a glittering ball of gold in one palm. He quickly makes his way to Hermione. She looks up from an image of vines twisting over an archway of crumbling stone.

"Why do you only draw in this book?" she asks softly.

"What?"

"You could buy charcoal and thick parchment, or canvas, or paint. I bet you could even sculpt with clay. Why don't you?" Her expression is open and shining, exuding certainty and brimming with some other emotion Harry can't name.

He feels his throat closing -- the familiar tendrils of words he had been

made to hear over and over again rise to the tip of his tongue: *not good enough boy, you are nothing, you will never be good at anything, you will never* ***be*** *good enough --*

“I’ve never done any of those before. I don’t think I’d be--” *able to do them at all, I’m never good enough, never* “--very good at them.”

Hermione scoffs. “Your art is a marvel. You’d be good. Trust me.”

Harry looks into her honey-brown hair, so full of life, to avoid the judgment he’s sure would be found in her caramel eyes. “You don’t know that.” he whispers.

“I do,” she says firmly. “I know you. You, Harry Potter, are *remarkable* . Just think about it -- for me, okay?”

He finally peeks a glance to her eyes, finding there only endless depths of faith refracted by her brilliant irises.

“Okay...” His voice is quiet. The snitch flutters weakly in his palm and tickles slightly. “I will.”

***

And think about it, Harry does. Hermione had planted a tiny seed within him, and Harry’s desire to express himself in multicolor turned auriferous, metamorphosed to golden water that dripped and trickled down the fresh-packed dirt of his anxieties, and causing that small little idea (that enormous possibility Harry could maybe do more than just sketch for himself — that he could paint, could sculpt even… that he could *frame* his work and hang it up and everyone could *see* —) to

blossom.

So Harry thinks... and he thinks... and then he writes to Tom.

Sitting curled up in an armchair in one corner of the common room (now affectionately referred to as “Harry’s corner”), he pulls out a quill and scrawls in the cherished book.

“Tom? You there?”

“I am always here, Harry.”

“Well, you could be busy or something. I’m not expecting you to be at my beck and call.”

Inkblots form on the page, each forming different amorphous shapes that hold odd impressions of muddled clouds. After six or seven shapes of darkness have finished their uneven spread of bleeding ink, Harry receives a response.

“You would not be the first to do so.”

“But I never expected that, so the point still stands. I’m sure you’ve got things to do. What *do* you do most days, when you’re not writing to me?”

“I swim, mostly. Relax in the shade of the trees. Sometimes I go out to the flower fields, or climb those lovely mountains you drew for me. So odd that at first I thought I was at Hogwarts, and now I think I’m somewhere else

altogether. A paradise, of sorts, I suppose. I feel a bit like Calypso."

"Calypso?"

"A Greek legend, a daughter of a Titan. Calypso was punished after the Olympians won a battle against her father. She was sent to live on an idyllic island, wanting for nothing other than companionship. Hero after hero was sent to her good graces, and she would nurse them back to health after injuries. She fell in love with each of them, but alas, every hero that came left Calypso behind. She remained, century after century, on an island paradise waiting for men who would always abandon her for delusions of glory."

"I'm not sure I would ever actively seek out glory. More trouble than it's worth."

"Oh, and you're familiar with glory, are you?"

"Well, yeah. I guess. I mean, I'm the boy-who-lived. Somehow I ended Voldemort's — he's a dark lord — reign of terror when I was a baby. I'm the only person alive to have survived the killing curse, but that was because of my mum. He killed both my parents, but I kept living... So yeah, the whole wizarding world thinks I'm this glorious hero, or something. And Voldemort's not even really dead, so some people think I'm going to have to defeat him all over again."

"You have glory in spades, then. The world thinks you a hero. Are you going to leave me, Harry?"

"I'd really rather not. I'm not looking for glory at all, no thank you. I'd like to be Just Harry. A boy who likes to draw a lot, and maybe's halfway decent in class."

“We don’t get to choose our circumstances.”

“But we can choose how we respond.”

“I suppose that is true, to an extent.”

“Thanks, Tom.”

“Anytime, Harry. I exist am here for you.”

***

We don’t get to choose our circumstances but can choose how we respond.

Harry’s been forced into the mantle of a martyr since entering the wizarding world, a hero who, dragging his feet, was forced to wield the sword that had taken the life of his parents. Recently, he had drawn a broken courtyard of shattered cobblestones and decaying trees -- he filled it with bones dyed green by the secretions leaking from sodden, overgrown moss. In between the remains of humanity, he etched snapped sticks of yew and cyprus and, in the center of the wreckage, he’d fashioned a tiny bundle with an unbroken phoenix feather and holly wand resting at its feet. He titled the piece: *‘Inheritance.’*

Harry was born to war, but (as he said to Tom) he can choose how he responds to his circumstances. He can keep playing the hero, burying himself further in layers upon layers of dusty graphite, or he can play

himself. He's not some glorious hero, some child general with the genius and experience and sheer reckless nerve (or endless, calm calculation) to end the reign of a monster. He's a boy of twelve who'll one day be a man, who holds pens and paintbrushes the way mothers hold their babies: like he cradles the future.

He ends up in Professor McGonagall's office, asking his head of house if he can buy art supplies using his money at Gringotts.

She looks at him suspiciously, mentions neither his father nor mother were particularly artistically inclined, and it really is quite unusual to request the use of personal money during the semester. She has "doubts" about his seriousness, feels it 'unwise' to spend money on a passing fancy.

Harry shrinks in on himself and feels tears welling up and threatening to escape. McGonagall sighs deeply and asks if he has any examples of his work, just so she can see if maybe she can work something out, and Harry hands the diary over dispassionately.

McGonagall glances at one page; her eyebrows rise. She flips to the next page, then the next, and the next, and the whole time she says nothing at all. *This is when she tells me I'm not good enough. And to stop wasting her time... She'll laugh at me.*

Professor McGonagall clears her throat. "Mr. Potter," she starts brusquely.

He looks up at her from underneath his lashes, face burning. His voice comes out a squeak. "Yes, Professor?"

"Do you realise how much magic these sketches of yours carry?"

Harry shrugs. “A bit?”

McGonagall presses her lips into a thin line. “A large amount. Far more than is typical. Enough, in fact, that you have the potential to be a portrait painter. There are very few people qualified for that work -- you’re to be able to see details people often miss, imbue your works with enough life so to capture the very soul of your reference. Do you ever get the sensation you are not just reproducing an image but creating a reality?”

Harry nods. “Well, yeah. I guess I feel like that when I’m drawing sometimes. I mean, I drew the ocean once... and I wasn’t just *drawing* the sea: I could smell salt and I got soaked in the spray of crashing waves.”

McGonagall extends long fingers against her desk, hands moving like a cat stretching itself out, then clawing down a scratching post. (The Dursleys had a cat once, Dudley named it ‘Kins-Kins’. They bought hordes of cat toys and built up a kitten palace, but Dudley forgot it to feed it for three days in a row so it ran away. Lucky thing. Harry remembers wishing he could have followed.)

The professor gives him a sharp smile. “I will of course order you all the supplies you shall need.”

“Need for what?”

McGonagall's eyes positively sparkle. “For your elective ‘Enchanted Artistry,’ of course. I am putting you in with the fifth years.”

Harry splutters, “But I’m not that good, professor.”

“You’re right,” McGonagall says without inflection.

Of course I am.

“You’re better. I can *not* allow a talent like yours go to waste.”

Harry stares down at his shoes. “What if I don’t want to be a portrait painter?”

McGonagall merely raises one brow. “Then I guess you’ll just create something else, won’t you, Mr. Potter? Perhaps you will change the world.”

Harry bites his lip to hide a pleased, growing smile. *Perhaps I will.*

***

The rumor starts small; *Harry Potter is good at art,* they whisper. It’s a spark that passes from mouth to mouth, jumps from one mind to another and fills up the buzzing halls with an incandescent glowing ember of fascination -- something that threatens to ignite.

Harry hears the whispers and hushed conversations, sees students with free periods congregate outside the art classroom to get a little glimpse of his work, endures Beatrice Haywood’s (one kind Hufflepuff in his fifth year art class) cheek pinches for being, in her words, ‘a little protége’, and finds that despite all the hassle, he rather greatly prefers this state of affairs to when he was shunned for being a parseltongue.

Even so, he finds he's always waiting for this fresh blanket of acceptance his peers have enveloped him in to be ripped away and replaced with an iron maiden of judgment, fierce cruelty eager to pierce his skin and draw his blood. People change their minds too quickly. No one had ever bothered to understand Harry Potter before he was a boy with a pencil... and no one really bothers to understand him even after they have eagerly commissioned doodles of dragons and quidditch trophies and flying carpets to fill up the margins of their notes during History of Magic with Professor Binns. Regard so easily won feels, to Harry, a great deal like an hourglass: golden grains of sand slowly slip through a clear glass sieve, and when the last speck of time falls from heaven to earth, this easy tolerance will be replaced afresh with contempt. It has happened before.

Always (always) the hourglass will be turned over again, the particles of fearful disgust will slowly give way to widespread approval, only for the cycle to all of a sudden reverse then repeat. Because to these people (these people who follow him around like he's a shepherd and they his sheep, or who at times ignore him like he's a criminal and they his unwilling jailors) he is not a person. He's a fairytale come to life, a living legend, a boy who has no business acting with free will and out of accordance with the stories they've been told going to bed, tales recounted from the mouths of parents dizzy with relief or aching with brittle anger. He can never live up to the fable of a miracle boy who ended a war because, because he never *has* ended a war. He is… (*never good enough, not for them, not for anyone*) tired of it.

The rumor turns into an inferno during the penultimate week of instruction. Draco Malfoy, scuffing his feet and turning red in the face, asks (begs) Harry to create him a painting.

"It's for my mother's birthday, you understand. We already have ***everything*** *-- not that* ***you'd*** *comprehend* ***that*** *-- and the artists we've on retainer exclusively paint portraits. It's dreadfully uninspired of them, don't you think? I looked into it, and… unfortunately, you are one of the only people around who makes* ***anything*** *other than portraits. So, Potter, will you make me something for her or not? I'll pay."*

Harry flounders gobsmacked for a long moment; Malfoy rolls his eyes and tilts his head expectantly... and then Harry blurts, *"10 galleons for my labor. And **you** cover the expenses for the materials."*

Malfoy nods and says, *"Naturally."* He pauses for a moment, and then decrees, *"You will have to start charging more if my mother decides she likes your work. We can't have something widely reported to cost **ten galleons** hanging up in our manor. If this goes well, I recommend charging at least seventy per piece, maybe even three-hundred or more for larger compositions."* Draco taps his foot and looks around with a kind of stilted arrogance. *"Well, get to it, Potter."*

The interaction is caught by a group of wide-eyed first years; they begin whispering furiously to one another. To Harry, it seems like the whole castle begins a giant game of Chinese Whisper. (Third year Stephanie Grant has an American mum and states *her* family calls it Telephone.) A new rumor now claims, 'Harry Potter charges six thousand galleons for his artwork, *and* he's got stuff displayed in the Tibetan Grand Mage's palace! He's recently been commissioned by the Malfoy family, too'.

He can't even deny them entirely, because he doesn't *know* what his prices really are, and he *is* making a piece for the Malfoys. It's a nightmare -- not at all like his dreams with Tom. But something about the attractive boy in silver and green robes has started to bother Harry, he often wakes with a cold sensation like a stroking shiver up his spine, thinking he can almost hear the phantom whispers of death. He finds himself, late one night, drawn back to the trophy room where he first saw a picture of his father (after eleven years waiting). He dully peruses the trophies and records, only pausing when one catches his eye:

'Tom Riddle, Head Boy, 1945.'

Found you. Where are you now, Tom?

***

Tom stands in a courtyard built of rubble as the sky above chokes on ashes. Harry stands beside him, flecks of grey disfiguring the solid obsidian of his hair. Tom takes a step forward and his leather boots crunch over rotting corpses. Their only remains are bones grown heavy under their burden of grotesque green.

Trees line the courtyard, the ruins of what must have once been beautiful, and they are twisted and blackened, scorched, maimed, and tumbling down in careless piles of broken limbs and putrid husks of trunks. The smell of decay taints the cold air, swelling noxiously around the faint hint of coming spring and mocking its potential of rebirth.

With heavy steps, Tom weaves through the debris to the center of the destruction, where a bundle of blankets is found empty, a wand laid at its feet like flowers resting on the headstone of somebody beloved. He picks up the wand with a trembling hand. Momentarily he forgets the scene around him, delighting in the familiar (and lately absent) hum of magic coursing through his veins. *How long has it been since I've cast a spell? Decades, I suppose.*

With a grin edging on manic, he takes the wand and flicks it with a practiced hand, causing eager sparks of green and black to fly out in a perfect arc. It is such simple magic but right now, he would swear it is the most beautiful sight he has ever seen. He tracks their motion, and notices Harry has come to stand beside him once more.

"It feels almost like *my* wand used to feel. Like its heart is the same, somehow. Is this *your* wand, Harry?"

He looks down at the boy standing at his rib, *where he belongs, next to and underneath me,* his green eyes hazy and unfocused as he surveys the wreckage. Harry startles at the words, then his eyes fill with a kind of pained understanding and he bites his lip until it draws a droplet of blood. It starts to run down his chin in a thin, stark rivulet... and unable to help himself, Tom swipes his thumb across Harry's lip, down to his neck, catching the drip on his fingertip. He brings up the thumb, warm now with the Gryffindor's blood, to his mouth -- thoughtfully, ever so slowly -- and sucks away copper and salt.

Harry has remained silent, only vaguely aware of the actions going on around him. A storm rages in his eyes.

"Harry, precious, did you hear me? Hmmm?" Tom grabs Harry's face between both his hands. "Treasure, did you hear what I asked?"

Harry finally looks up at Tom, verdant eyes filled with unshed tears. "Who did you become, Tom Riddle?" he whispers in a breaking voice.

Tom lets go of Harry's face and tugs the boy into his chest. He folds his arm around the younger boy's slender form. The artist's arms hang slack at his sides. Tom keeps his voice light as he asks, "Whatever do you mean?"

Harry tries to push away from Tom's embrace, but he refuses to let the younger boy go. He keeps a tight hold on him, forcing him to remain still in the same position. After struggling for a few moments, Harry goes limp in his arms.

He lets out a shuddering breath. "Tom Riddle," the boy mumbles, "was a real person. I saw the name when I went to see my father's Quidditch trophy. He was the captain. I saw your name in the room.

And you… *you* were head boy -- in *1945* ."

"Was I?" Tom smiles, pleased -- also unsurprised. "Of course, I was."

"Why don't you know that?" Harry's voice is muffled against Tom's chest. "Shouldn't you know your own life?"

Tom lays a hand on the boy's head and tugs at flyaway locks with nimble fingers. "I became a memory at sixteen. I don't know everything about who I eventually became."

"I learned all about you until your thirties," Harry admits softly. "I looked you up. You went to work in Knockturn Alley and went to a library in Alexandria. You even applied for the Defense position here, but you were rejected, and then you just… *disappeared* . You just disappeared. But you didn't die, did you? You *became* someone else, someone with a different name..." His voice is all accusation, underpinned by fear.

Harry starts struggling again against the Slytherin's chest. "You did, didn't you?!"

"Do you know something, darling?" Tom's head, looming, bows over Harry. His voice drops to a lower timbre as his lips press mockingly gentle to the other's ear. "Do I scare you, Harry? Are you going to try and leave me?"

Harry pushes away again and this time, Tom lets him go. The boy stumbles backwards, tripping over a skull laced with vines, crashing onto his back twisted awkwardly, and comes to find himself encased in the debris of war.

Tom shakes his head slowly. “I will not let you.” He rolls up his sleeves, still grasping the holly wand, and with deliberate, elegant footfalls, strides over to where the boy is sprawled aheap the refuse, maintaining eye contact the whole time.

“You know, you *have* to know--” Harry’s voice is shaking “-- because you must know *enough* about who you were, will be -- what you became-- be*come*! You know what you--” he is trembling now, all over, *the poor thing will hurt himself,* “the things you did… What you *did* to ***them***.”

Tom reaches out to him--

He tries to scoot backwards. His voice escapes in a panicked yelp, almost shouting, “Don’t touch me, you-- but Tom sits down on the boy’s chest, legs straddling him, and holds the fragile wrists with one hand.

“Are you saying I become a monster, Harry?” Tom asks in an almost teasing tone. He leans down to gently -- *sharply* -- nip at Harry’s neck. “It would be unwise to provoke something like that...”

Harry is a mess of squirming limbs, each independently attempting to dislodge the older boy from his position. Tom intentionally shifts all of his weight onto the younger boy’s lungs, knocking Harry’s breath out of him.

“No, no, none of that, precious. Sit still,” he orders.

Tom patiently waits until the younger boy falls motionless, gasping (begging) wordlessly for breath -- before allowing his weight to resettle on the legs cleverly caging the boy.

Harry gasps an inhale.

“Just say it, already,” he chokes out, voice wrecked and raspy, “Just say you know.”

He appears as if he wishes to cry but is holding it all in -- overwrought, his form trembles with tension. It is his eyes that pause Tom, however; they hold a fierce determination and the toxic reproach of betrayal. Tom frowns down at the marvel trapped in his arms.

“You won’t like the answer, I fear...” He turns his gaze to the piles of bones littering the dusty ground, motioning to the rubble with a sweeping gesture, “Where are we, Harry? What is this to you?”

“This is my ***inheritance*** *,”* Harry all but spits. “This is what was left me.” ... *It was* ***your*** *fault* goes unsaid.

Tom releases Harry’s wrists and that strangely familiar wand. It clatters to the broken ground. Picking up the charred remains of a yew stick, one that feels so much like the wand he received all those years ago in Ollivanders, Tom grasps the two halves between his fingers.

“I think you know, Harry. You know who I became.” Tom’s calculating gaze passes across the crumbling courtyard -- this place that waits for the sun, and instead is dusted daily by ash -- and feels his own throat close at the reminder of what he left in the world Above. “This is your inheritance...” he says. His voice sounds bitter and anguished even to his own ears. “It is *my* ***legacy*** .”

Chapter End Notes

A lot happened, huh guys? Tom is still a creeper (or maybe just hopelessly obsessed and learning to love) aaand I had to remind y'all. Drop a comment down below, tell me your engaging thoughts. Thanks for reading!

This chapter was beta-ed by Interconfluence and they did it through hell and high water.

Check out my other work, Another Mindgame

XOXOXO

Prodigy

Chapter Summary

Remember Lockhart?

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a long one, so very long. Shout to interconfluence for beta-ing this one HARD, because it needed a lot of help. More edits may on the way, so be warned.

Most chapters will not be this long. But this one just had a lot happen.

If you want a fluffier (though somewhat angsty) Severitus, check out my other fic: Another Mindgame

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry takes a breath and, looking up for a moment into cloudy eyes of grey bearing down on him, inlaid with specs of sapphires and slivers of onyx he's been itching to paint, he feels his heartbeat stutter then change its tempo...

He feels his world shatter.

It's a devastating explosion -- a silent catastrophe within him. Shards of soul-spun glass are strewn across his memory, their jagged edges searing his insides, shearing off skin and layers of joyful moments shared between he and Tom until all that remains is scarlet ribbons. Moments of quiet warmth nestled between strong arms or wrapped in downy quilts are all stained, tinged crimson -- copper-scented and bitter. His view of their past has been painted red.

His bare feet are shredded as they tread heavily across barbed fragments… but Harry is numb to the pain. Because there, embedded on all the fractured windows of his soul… these reminiscences, reflects one (terrifying) single word: ***Voldemort*** **.** It's all Harry can see, can

hear… it's all he tastes on his dry tongue and feels traced across his raw, battered skin.

Tom's Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldemort. Voldemort. He … he … he killed my parents.

Tom is…Voldemort. ***Voldemort.*** Voldemort *Voldemort.* ***Voldemort*** *. And…he- he killed my* ***parents*** *.*

Voldemort. ***He's*** *voldemort.*

Killed my parents (kissed my forehead when people called me a murderer).

Killed my parents (lectured me on how to dice thunderbird muscle patiently).

Killed my parents (told me he would never leave me alone…)

Killed my parents…said, "I would ***kill*** *for you."*

Loud and near-incomprehensible, echoing as if through a long, winding tunnel, Harry thinks he can hear a man shouting, 'take Harry and *run* ' -- an echoing reply that is no reply at all… a high, cold voice ordering, 'stand aside'…and he sees then (sees so vividly it's like he's *right there*) a flash of dazzling green -- brilliant, toxic, and deadly. For a moment, Harry stands adrift, watching as though out of his body, in a sea of shattered glass and bloody tears… where a man appears before him, an apparition that appears to be an older version of Tom (*his* Tom…his protective, ridiculous Tom who's somehow Voldemort and--). This new, older Tom is an almost perfect replica, bearing little

sign of actual aging upon his skin, but his hair is absent and his eyes are the livid scarlet Harry recalls from last year's waking nightmare.

Harry almost thinks he hears a fresh voice (added into the cacophony of his memory of that night at Godric's Hollow), that this apparition before him speaks… laughs, chillingly cold, "**I** am Lord Voldemort."

It's as though someone else is that monster. As though *Tom* is...not...that very same monster. This Voldemort before Harry, with eyes the colour of freshly spilled blood, bows his head once and, as if entirely unreal, dissipates into the shards of broken mirrors and windows. Harry is left standing there, staring unseeing at the wreckage of his recollections. There was something painfully familiar about the man who faded away, like a long-lost friend shrouded beneath years of forgotten bonds.

It takes Harry several moments to notice someone is speaking.

"Harry, no! Come on now...not you, ***never*** *you."* The voice is frantic, *pleading -- "Come back to me, my darling -- come on now sweetheart, just breathe for me--"* desperate, even. *"Harry, please--* ***please*** *, I'm sorry… I'm so* ***sorry*** *. Can you open your eyes for me? Harry… please please open your eyes. You can hate me, alright? You can hate me all you like, darling, just pleaseplease open your eyes! Open your eyes, Harry. Please… please--I can't- I can't...I just can't--"*

Something warm is dripping onto Harry's cheek. It's shocking and his senses sharpen enough for him to realize he's lying on the hard ground, head pillowed in Tom's lap. This wetness, then… it must be the elder boy's… tears? *Is he crying over me?*

Tom's voice comes in a hoarse whisper now. "No *no* , Harry. Come back to me, treasure. Open your eyes… Please, I won't hurt you--I

would *never* … I promise. I will *never* lie to you again. Never."

That ridiculous comment is enough to cause Harry to crack one emerald eye open and cough out, *"Liar."*

"Harry," Tom breathes in clear relief. His eyes are bright with it, and pink-rimmed… from weeping over Harry -- *for* him. "Harry," he repeats over and over again as if the name is a revelation, prayer, and absolution.

Tom's hands… Harry realizes, are rhythmically pressing against all the pulse points they can reach, one of the elder boy's thumbs rests on his wrist, and the other hand deftly cradles Harry's head to, at the same time, press two fingers against the vital artery passing through his neck. They twitch as though maybe to move away now that Harry is awake, but in the end they remain for the assurance of his beating heart.

He tries to sit up but, holding his head cradled in one palm and splaying his fingers across Harry's chest, Tom gently pushes him back down.

"Shhhhh..." Tom murmurs. "Stay still, my darling. You're *alright* now."

Harry's responding giggles are a tad hysterical, and Tom furrows his brows in concern. Harry catches his breath slowly, mood growing somber. "Nothing is alright," he mutters bitterly. "Not now -- not *ever* ." He tries again to sit up... and groans at the onset of sudden nausea.

Immediately, Tom's hands begin to flutter anxiously over him, the elder boy inspecting Harry with an intense focus.

“Are you in pain? What’s *wrong* ?” Tom’s voice is loud and concerned and Harry can’t help but look up at the older boy; he is so clearly out of his depth… and desperate. *“Tell me* so I can *fix* it!”

***This** man is the man who killed my parents? This boy, who was crying because I was unresponsive for a few minutes? Who is so worried about me even **now** ?*

“Impossible,” Harry whispers.

Tom’s eyes snap back to Harry’s. “What is?” He asks cautiously.

“You,” Harry responds simply. “I… don’t think you killed my parents. Because you’re not Voldemort. *Not yet*... Are you?”

Tom is quiet for a long moment. “...No--” he at last tentatively agrees “--but I certainly intended to be, before I was trapped here.”

Harry nods (though the action is a subtle, muted one due to the lack of available mobility when his head’s resting on Tom’s lap). “I thought so,” he sighs. “And...what about now?”

Tom cocks his head. “What do you mean, ‘what about now?’”

Harry’s eyes deliberately bear into Tom’s, green eyes wide and beseeching. “Do you still want to be Voldemort?” he clarifies.

Tom can’t help but stare back at Harry, almost stumbling under the weight of his regard. When he does speak, his voice is quiet… almost

small. “No… I do not want that… not anymore.”

Harry nods more freely now, a weight off his chest as he feels himself pulled back into the land of the living from this dreamscape where memory and creation intersect. The wind rustles his oversized pyjama top (it was Dudley’s a lifetime ago, once white but now the same murky grey as this world’s sky, with age and lack of care), wrapping it around his fragile frame.

“For now,” he decides, “that’s enough.”

Like all mornings, Harry slowly fades from the dream, opening his eyes to brilliant sunlight shining through cracks in the curtains of his four-poster. He can sense, somewhere beyond the edge of consciousness, Tom left standing alone in the rubble (and he sees almost like a mirage, the elder boy trembling, staring at the fractured yew wand in his hand. It takes a long time for Tom to realize flowers of radiant gold have grown where all his tears fell…) Harry’s lips quirk to a broken half-smile. *Not every story ends with destruction. This is… A new beginning to his legacy.*

***

For the first time in months, Harry leaves the diary under his pillow when he goes to breakfast. He feels naked without it, but he needs a break. Forgiveness and understanding demand time -- it will take many hours before he can order the mess in his head. There’s too many components to this… relationship he’s forged with someone who’s almost (-but-not-quite) the man who murdered his parents. Red and white, green and grey, black and blue-yellow and purple... are all blurred together, mixed and confused, fighting one another for dominance… threatening to leave a great big murky mess of brown… and Harry refuses to allow his mind to fall into such a state of muddled monotone. There’s beauty in the danger of the war inside his mind, but Harry will not allow his psyche to remain a place of

destruction.

So he leaves the diary and ventures bravely out into the great hall empty-handed. It doesn't feel like giving up… not really. Not on his art, nor on Tom. It feels more like growing up (a child letting go of his baby blanket).

Oliver Wood, the most vocal of his fans (after having been converted to team-Harry after viewing a quidditch sketch), ruffles Harry's hair, asking after the book.

("Hey there, Harry! Anything new you dreamed up last night?"

...and Harry can't help it -- he flinches at the reminder, then plasters on a fake smile.

"Not last night, no… Been working on designs for Malfoy.")

That, evidently, was enough of a mood-dampener for people to change their conversations to their collective disklike *Malfoy* , of all people, is going to be the first to get a 'Harry Potter original'. The blonde Slytherin himself, meanwhile, has taken to bragging about the fact he will *always* be the first person to have purchased Harry's original work. Gryffindor and Hufflepuff especially seem to take offense to this truth, glaring pointedly at Malfoy whenever he saunters past them down the halls. The Ravenclaws seem more amused than anything, and have created several betting pools (in which the Slytherins participate) over who will be the next to receive an HP creation, and what the 'boy-who-lived' will paint for the Malfoy heir.

Hermione and Ron are the ones to key Harry into one important truth about all the posturing he seems to have missed. As Harry valiantly tries to finish eating his toast, Ron leans in over his shoulder.

“They’re all assuming your art’s going to be famous, mate.”

Hermione nudges him from his other side. “That’s why Draco’s so proud. They all think your art will be priceless one day.”

Harry knows his face must be red as blood the petals of the red-red rose so often sung of in Petunia’s (off-key) song, but he can’t help the small smile their words inspire. “I doubt it, but I’ve got to admit I like the faith they’ve given me.” *I just hope I don’t let them down. I* ***will*** *though… I’m never good enough.*

Hermione must have gained the ability to read minds, because she swats Harry’s ear, saying, “You won’t be able to make anything short of *outstanding* , because that’s all you’ve ever done.”

Ron nods seriously, agreeing. “I don’t think there’s ever been anyone like you before.”

Harry laughs to hide his discomfort. “The scar on my forehead agrees with you, I guess.”

Ron grins widely. “You bet it does! Lockhart’s got ‘fame’, but *you’ve* got *talent* -- bet he’s never actually done any of that crap he goes on about in his books… I mean really, capturing a banshee with a tea-strainer? Or something like that, whatever -- so stupid, I forgot. Point is, Seamus has seen one and says they can’t *be* banished or caught or whatever, ‘cause they’re like iphen- ineffab--

“ *Ephemeral* , Ron. You were closer the first time,” Hermione tiredly corrects.

“Yeah, *that* -- they’re like ephemeral, only last a few seconds -- screeching, and all-- before they just puff away, so he’s gotta just be full of steaming horse shi--, shoes!”

This leads to an argument from Hermione that people can’t just publish whatever they like, that ‘there are fact-checkers, Ron!’, while most of those in earshot nod enthusiastically (whether for Hermione or for Ron’s opinion, isn’t clear).

“But anyway,” Ron says, restoring the original subject, “my point is you’re *good* -- everyone knows it. I bet soon people *outside* Hogwarts will too!”

For some reason, Ron seems to feel a need to ruffle Harry’s hair, making it take on an appearance even closer to Worzel Gummidge (if he were dark-haired) than its usual nest-like aesthetics, leaving him thoroughly disheveled by the time he shows up to DADA. (Ron runs in late, having begged-off to use the loo...though Harry’s sure that was just an excuse). Lockhart’s class today, like every day, is a waste of time. The Gryffindor and Hufflepuff mixed class spend most the lesson muttering (the one’s at the back of the class, at any rate -- Lockhart seems to have a selective-hearing problem) or passing notes if they’re too close to the front (because he’s got a selective-sight problem, too) about how the DADA ‘professor’ is surely a fraud, and questioning when the curse against DADA professors will strike him, and if it will expose all his secrets. Several plans spawn to “help the curse along,” but Harry pays them little mind, trying to decide what Malfoy might find an acceptable subject for his commission.

The project consumes him. He’s caught a raging inferno between his fingertips, and it feels like it burns his palms and ignites his breath in an attempt to set the world alight. Every moment he’s not working on homework or practicing for upcoming quidditch matches, he spends in the Enchanted Artistry classroom (which is the north tower, underneath a rather batty professor’s abode. She smells like sherry and wears so many shawls and strings of beads, when Harry passed her in

the corridor he thought she was *decor*). He sketches out design after design on spare scraps of parchment, collects the paints he needs and blends one shade of white with a pale sort of silver over and over, trying to get it right. He spends hours mixing pigment to make sure *all* the colours are *perfect* .

The first gentle touch of paint on canvas feels like coming home.

The brush in his palm feels like it connects to the innermost point of his soul. The world slips away as he paints, one stroke and another and another, then lines and textures and layers form organically, as if without thought, until he begins to see his burgeoning world take form. (The fire in him dims and glows now, rather than burns).

The fifth year art students begin to, in the coming days, check the room periodically to ensure he won't forget to eat or sleep (after they caught him spending a full thirty-eight hours working over the weekend: no breaks). Beatrice Haywood comes in to check on one of her portraits (one of her grandmother that, unfortunately, doesn't seem it will take root… not enough soul, according to Professor Badgerwood), and tells Harry (quite sternly, with perhaps an element of worry underlying that) she found him bowed low and enthralled over his canvas, blinking blearily and ghost-pale.)

Once she had dragged him away from his painting, she forced him to drink water, gulp down a sandwich and then, "Go to bed -- directly to *bed* . I don't want to see you until Monday. And take *better care of yourself* , Harry...honestly."

(He goes straight back that evening, once she was out of the room… but what she doesn't know won't kill her.)

He still dreams of Tom's world (and the things he made for him there), but whenever he finds himself in the odd little mismatched

paradise (and wasteland) of his creation, he searches for places to hide the Slytherin won't find him.

He squeezes into closets, huddles beneath beds. He even spends one night climbing a tree on the edge of the quidditch grounds…

And every night, Tom finds him right before daybreak, reaching out desperately for him just as he fades away.

Harry wakes up with wetness on his cheeks, his jackhammering heartbeat echoing the loneliness he feels seeping into his every waking moment; a loneliness so deep he can't tell if it's his own or not.

He takes to drawing in the diary at odd times, in these last two weeks before the school year ends. There are moments when getting up feels like a chore, when the loneliness presses him deep into an expansive darkness. When the solitude threatens to swallow him whole, he needs a break from Malfoy's painting (from expectations and the knowledge of certain failure,) but not from creating, so he'll open the cherished book and draw something small to remind himself that not everything needs to change. He doodles in the borrowed seconds from ticking clocks so that he can pretend, if only for a blink of an eye, that his world was never shattered. He crafts small things, little sketches: a single snowflake, a floating feather -- trinkets to remind Tom that he has not been abandoned. (Trinkets to remind *Harry* that someone once cared).

Lockhart's class is particularly convenient for this slow and subtle build to a reunion with Tom (distant and sporadic though it may be) …especially as the DADA professor has taken great offense to Harry's sudden spike in fame and popularity ratings, and has decided the best method to remedy his own declining fanbase is through ignoring the boy-who-lived altogether. He refers to Harry only peripherally, in a condescending, disdainful sort of a way, though that has not stopped him from making inquiries of his own to art masters around the world to see if he too can capitalize on what is clearly a worthy pursuit.

Harry privately thinks that Lockhart has all the artistic capabilities of a dung beetle.

Of course, between the discovery of Tom's future identity and the stress (and blooming pride) of crafting what, he hopes, will be a masterpiece, Lockhart's low-level passive-aggressive comments (about Harry's notoriety) and general (substantial) level of incompetence are insignificant. And these days, taking pot-shots at Harry is a quick way to earn the ire of a class.

It's almost as if Lockhart can sense just how thoroughly unimportant he's becoming in the minds of his anything-but-attentive students; the mysterious beast vanished and the petrified students were restored, the pupils who once worshipped him have long realized how pompous he really is, and the Weasley twins successfully turned his teeth all colours of the rainbow every day for a month, so his 'Witch Weekly Smile' is continually out of commission.

The man's getting foolish and sloppy in his desperation to recapture attention (and his award-winning smile), but Harry is still as inattentive in his class as ever… until he chances a sight out the corner of his eye of Hermione's hand high in the air, waving back and forth like it was their first potions lesson all over again. Looking closer, he sees something dangerous glinting in her eyes. ..and something more manic shining in Ron's. And before her, Hermione has a phial of perfectly clear liquid.

"Professor Lockhart, sir!" she all but *yells* over-eagerly. "I need your expertise."

The whole class, Harry included, snaps their focus to the frizzy-haired genius who he is pretty sure no longer believes the oversized man-child striding towards her has knowledge worth a grain of salt (making him overall worthless, where she's concerned).

“Yes, Miss Granger! What is it I can help you with?” he asks, seemingly proud to at last be recognized for his skills.

Hermione displays confusion, making a good show of it -- Harry almost believes she’s a lost and helpless... *naive* girl silly enough to ask *Lockhart* (of all people) for intellectual aid, but he knows her too well. *What is her game?*

“Professor Snape gave me this--” she presents the phial to Lockhart’s eyes “--and told me to identify it as a test, but it’s *obviously* at least an OWL level potion and I couldn’t *possibly* work it out all on my own! And I know from your book *‘The Last Stopper Before Paradise’* that *you* can identify any potion known to wizardkind, so I thought perhaps you could help me? Please, sir, it’s *really important* !”

The praise (and mention of one of his works not on this year’s book list) puffs Lockhart right up: he gingerly pinches the phial between two fingers and brings it up to his face for inspection.

“Hmmmm…” he says ponderously, “clear.. .completely so. Yes, difficult, very difficult.” His voice drops to an over-exaggerated murmur, forcing the class to lean in if they want to catch what he’s saying. Then, he removes the phial's crystal stopper--

“No, professor, it could be dangerous!” Hermione exclaims.

In the background, Ron can be heard saying, “Yeah, hopefully. Wouldn’t put it past Snape to try and kill the best in our year.”

Deftly operating his selective-hearing again, Lockhart ignores his comments and waves off Hermione’s apparent worry all in one cavelier motion.

“Have no fear, my dear,” he announces (in vomit-inducing rhyme), taking a liberal sniff of the phial, “for I believe your professor has given you water as a practical joke! In quite poor taste, I may say, to leave such a spectacular student running around in circles like a headless jobberknoll, looking for the solution to an unsolvable puzzle.” Smiling at his own genius, to show Hermione the truth of the matter, Lockhart swallows down the contents of the phial and, with a pleased expression, states, “See, just water.”

As Harry watches the scene with a kind of morbid fascination, Ron uses his highly-questionable wand and hastily mutters a fireworks spell. It has an effect, though probably not the intended one: (his wand hasn’t cast anything properly for months --it really needs replacing--) a flurry of sparks leap out of its tip to flit up towards the ceiling and stream out into the hall. The light display, albeit far cry from an actual firework, attracts attention… and soon several passing students have congregated outside the door to get a look at what’s going on… and *they* seem to have further captured the attention of the sixth-year Slytherin class, who have a free period and now barge through the first students on the scene to cluster in the open doorway.

Lockhart, witnessing Ron’s actions with obvious confusion, barks, “Weasley! Why in Merlin’s name did you do that?”

Ron smiles with teeth razor sharp… a shark like grin that is not at all like him. “Why, sir,” he says, far too innocently, “which Weasley do you pose that question to?”

Lockhart looks affronted. “You-- *Ronald* Weasley, of course!”

The Weasley (who is Ron but… not Ron, maybe?) in question shakes his head slowly. “No can do then, professor, seems I’m the wrong Weasley… Ever heard of Polyjuice Potion?”

The man manages to *chuckle* condescendingly. “Of *course* I have.”

Not-Ron (Fred here to torture Lockhart in some new and exciting way, if Harry were to guess) nods thoughtfully. Harry is almost surprised Lockhart did know what it was, considering all the things he *doesn’t know* could probably fill the Hogwarts library five times over (Hermione would not approve of the addition)… though there is the possibility he could be lying to save face.

“And have *you* ever brewed a successful Polyjuice yourself?”

Lockhart's brows furrow, adding about thirty years to his apparent age (he would be horrified to find out). “Well… *no* , not yet, but I have people I can *pay* for that sort of thing.

The class and assembled bystanders gasp (well, discounting the Slytherins, who *smirk* and get a hungry gleam in their eyes). The deepening frown lines (about fifty years now) on Lockhart’s face and sudden air of panic about him suggests the so-clearly-fraudulent professor has suddenly realised what he just said. He opens his mouth to speak, perhaps to backtrack and fix this but--

“Did you actually perform any of the deeds you claim you have in your books?”

Oh yeah, Harry thinks, *that’s* ***got*** *to be Fred* .

“Of course I did!” Lockhart exclaims, apparently outraged.

Honestly, Harry had assumed the whole lot of Lockhart's books were merely worthless rubbish, or children's fiction; it seems he was hardly the only one, as several of the bystanders, and most their Gryffindor/ Hufflepuff class, raise their eyebrows in surprise at Lockhart's pronouncement. Who knew the vain professor was legitimately capable of *anything.* Maybe Harry had misjudged him somewhat…

Then, just as a couple of people (as Harry) began to look like they felt bad for him, maybe-Fred clarified: "What that you claimed in your books you did, did you *actually* do?"

"I cut whisperweed with a pocketknife, if you must know. You can find that anecdote in my work *'The Merman and the Wizard: the love story that almost was'.* "

"But nothing else?"

Lockhart nods, looking absolutely horrified but equally matter-of-fact. "Nothing else."

At that, pandemonium breaks out. Onlookers gasp and stare and several scatter (mainly Slytherins), off to break the news to all parts of the castle (or in some cases, collect bet money). In the same moment, Harry nearly topples from his seat as right in front of him, Susan Bones begins to fizzle and *melt* , her form bubbling in and out of focus until a Weasley twin has replaced her -- Harry supposes *that* 's where George went. Lavender Brown really *does* fall out of her seat, ending up sprawled across the floor, gazing up at the exposed Lockhart with tears in her eyes (she was one of the dwindling few who still stood up for the famous man in Gryffindor), betrayed and heartbroken.

"Then how did you tell all those stories and get all that credit for things you never actually accomplished?" the newly-revealed twin asks.

Lockhart stares down obnoxiously at the class. “Memory charms, my dear boy. I am rather skilled. Wave your wand, wipe a few observers or a town to record their story as the sole hero first and -- voila! Amass an empire.”

Needless to say, it all rather devolves from that point, children panicking for the safety of their own minds due to their newfound witness status, Hufflepuffs bustling with indignation at the illegality of it all, and Hermione and the twins gloating over the mass panic a simple phial of clear liquid managed to amass.

After a few moments of utter anarchy, it becomes evident that at least one of the sixth year Slytherins went off to go and retrieve Snape, and the potions master appears in the classroom doorway irate, black robes swirling almost violently about his frame.

He surveys the scene with a kind of dispassionate disdain, before turning his eyes on Weasleys one and two. His lips curl with a terrifying grimace, but there is a note of acknowledgement in his black pupils. His gaze falls on the empty phial in front of Hermione’s textbook before he turns his eyes to Lockhart.

“I am not an errand boy.” He says in a velvet soft voice. “So if I am to be bothered whilst in the process of brewing volatile, highly potent, potentially toxic compounds which are more *valuable* than all your heads combined, it must be done with ample cause for concern.”

Lockhart gulps nervously before attempting to showcase his show-stopping smile, but the effect falls rather flat due to his strong nerves and dusty blue teeth. Snape does not react at all to the display.

“Cat got your tongue, Gilderoy? I must say, I find your silence quite

the improvement." Neither comment is a real question and Lockhart seems to have not heard them (there's that selective attention rearing its ugly head once more). Snape releases a long suffering sigh. "Why am I here?"

Lockhart shrugs in a move uncharastically childish (though entirely within his character) and lets out a nervous laugh. "I suppose because you walked?" Lockhart surmises.

Snape leans into the doorway of the classroom and grips his wand tightly in one hand. "Why did one of my students claim you have admitted to fraud and the illegal use of memory charms?"

An unpleasant spot of pink color finds its ways to Lockhart's sagging cheeks. "Well, most likely because I -- ahem -- did admit to both of those." Lockhart looks absolutely broken at the words he's spewing, so he makes a desperate attempt to justify his actions. "I mean, it's not like there's anything wrong with it really. Nobody would care at all about the capture of subterranean pixie-crawlers if it weren't for me, so really by wiping the memory of only a few members of the Portuguese wizarding community, I saved their entire culture from obscurity. It's just one memory for another, and the memories I give people are full of adventure and joyful endings. Mine are happier, can't you see that? I deserve to have credit for all those things because I make people so very happy, I make myself so happy, when people believe me to be their knight in shining armor, their hero come to save the day."

If anything, Snape looks less interested than before.

"Is that so?" He drawls. Lockhart nods and Snape continues to stand, watching. The moment is drawn out long enough for Lockhart to begin fidgeting with static anxiety.

Snape gives the man one final glower and then looks down at Hermione with a severe expression of distaste. “Ten points from Gryffindor for failing to identify a potion on your own power, despite my *explicit* instructions.”

Though the rest of the class seems to be caught off guard by the sudden change of conversation, Harry amongst those startled, Lockhart is unapologetically relieved and Hermione looks so affronted, her hair has started to rise about her head in a whirlwind of curls.

“But sir!” She cries, “I only had it beca--”

Snape cuts her off, “Ten more for talking back to a professor. Do keep going, Ms. Granger, see how that ends for you.” His voice holds a promise, and then he sighs once more and asks, in a bored tone, “do you at least know now what it was?”

Blushing furiously, Hermione nods and spits,“Veritaserum, *sir.* ”

A look of realization dawns over the faces of everyone in the class. Lockhart takes a half step backwards and trips over the still sprawled form of one Lavender Brown, landing flat on his bum.

“But, but -- but that can’t be *right.* It was water -- I was certain; so sure, so *very* sure… .” he trails off with a kind of abject misery.

Snape twirls his wand between his fingers. “I would hate to be on the receiving end of anything about which you were *un* certain, Gilderoy, if this is the result of your certainty.”

Lockhart seems to be beyond self-defense now, and only mutters, “Yes, yes, I suppose you would.”

“I can brew the antidote for your predicament, of course,” Snape notes, “but I’m afraid you’ll have to come with me for auror questioning in the meantime.”

This seems to snap Lockhart out of his reverie and he starts shouting, “it’s a misunderstanding,” and, “the use of veritaserum without consent in trials is illegal,” and, “you can’t do this to the wizarding world’s sweetheart,” but Snape pays him no mind and simply immobilizes him in a body binding spell and levitates him out of the classroom like a grotesque ragdoll.

His eyes sweep over the classroom once more before pushing forward a tall Slytherin sixth year and declaring, “Gemma Farley is in charge of you until your next class begins. If you do anything other than obey her every word like your life depends on it, I will make you sorry indeed. Do. Not. Test. Me.”

Warning delivered, Snape exits the classroom with a swish of his robes, dragging the floating Lockhart behind him, and enjoying a little too much (or at least most likely enjoying if the slight *bounce* in his step is any indication) “accidentally” banging the DADA professor into the walls.

***

The end of the school year comes as a surprise to Harry. Between Lockhart being crucified in the daily prophet for fraud and the multiple reports of angry middle-aged-women (Mrs. Weasley included) burning his books, students have been somewhat preoccupied with the spectacle of their former DADA professor.

Snape and McGonogall both have been in spectacularly high spirits

since the Witch's Weekly's Best Smile was moved behind bars, and the second year class has benefited from what some older years complained were "likely the easiest exams for lower years ever."

Fred successfully convinced his parents that Ron needed a new wand after forcing Percy to try casting anything and the prefect ended up with a slightly singed hairline for attempting a Lumos. Ron got his wand only four days ago, and was able to successfully transfigure his teacup for the first time in his life.

So the last day of school comes as a surprise, and Harry laments that he hasn't even had the time to feel nervous.

Draco required (and loudly demanded) that Harry unveil his mother's gift in public before he determined whether or not it would be a worthy present for the Pureblood lady.

" *I'll have to look at the reactions of the masses and minimize them by approximately three hundred percent to understand how my mother will view the piece. If I am to be adding artwork to the manor, it* ***must*** *have all the refinement of a true masterpiece. You understand, of course."*

The Slytherin chose to have the event on the last day of school as a kind of going away party. A party which is happening today, as in right now.

Harry's moodily glowering in the corner of what he could easily classify as a showcase gala. The great hall is clear of house tables and small platters of refreshments float about on gleaming polished silver. The entire school appears to be in attendance and several parents and professors are overseeing the student horde and anxiously awaiting the reveal.

The Malfoy family sent Harry dress robes for the occasion which he donned with no small amount of self-doubt. He stands at the far end of the room wearing forest green silk robes adorned in golden filigree. Hermione and Ron stand on either side of him, grounding him in the moment because with all the people and expectations he feels so out of his body he's worried he might float away.

Behind the three of them, on the wall, is a large covered canvas. Harry's biting his lips anxiously.

"They're going to hate it," he whispers urgently. One of the goblins in attendance (to help move the painting from Hogwarts to Malfoy Manor should Draco deem it "worthy") grimaces at Harry in a show of either intimidation or misguided support.

The golden boy tries valiantly to avoid hyperventilating. Hermione squeezes his hand.

"Harry," she admonishes, "look at all these people who've shown up to support you. They're here because they believe in you."

Harry shudders. "What if I lose that?" He asks quietly. *Again,* is a thought that comes unbidden.

Ron smacks Harry's arm lightly. "You won't." He promises. "But even if you do, even if they decide that you're not a great artist, you enjoyed making the piece, didn't you?"

Harry nods.

"Then that's all that matters. These people," Ron motions to the room at large, "they're just small fish in small ponds hoping for something

great, and you Harry, you're a big whale,"

"An Orca," Hermione suggests.

"Right, you're an Orca swimming as king of the ocean. They want desperately to swim in your waters, but you already have everything you need. So let them gawk, Harry. I'm sure you'll give them one hell of a show." he finishes.

Hermione stage whispers, "That was a good pep talk, Ron."

Harry rolls his eyes. "That was really quiet, Hermione," he whisper-shouts.

He smiles tightly and turns to look at the assembled crowd. His art class is watching him with their own odd brand of pride (it is quite strange after all to be three years older than the professor's favorite student, but Harry's nothing if not the kind of person you can't help but want to protect) and they all give him a salute. A few other students are looking at Harry with expressions he can't even begin to unpack, and Ginny Weasley seems to be splitting her time eating chocolates off the trays and trying to get one of the twins to dance with her. She almost seems to be intentionally avoiding looking over at the little friend-group by the wall. Draco Malfoy is speaking to everyone all at once and letting people fawn in their simpering manner over his azure robes, but he eventually strolls over to where the golden trio is assembled and raises a glass in front of Harry.

"It's time, wonder boy." He says, taking a small sip of whatever it is he's drinking. "Dazzle me."

Harry grimaces at the nickname and mutters, "... You really know how to make a boy feel special, Malfoy."

He takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders. “Are you going to do the talking or shall I?”

Draco sweeps into a mocking bow. “This show is all on you, golden monkey, take it away.” His eyes narrow. “It’s an awful lot of people expecting great things from you. Impress us.”

Faking a bravado he does not feel, Harry flashes a brilliant smile. “I aim to exceed expectations.”

Hermione helps him cast a Sonorous and Harry raises one hand. The metallic detail on his sleeve catches the light and abruptly the audience turns to gaze at him. He flushes brilliant crimson but keeps his resolve.

His voice trembles slightly but his words are clear. “Thank you everyone for coming to this impromptu event to see my first ever sold work, I guess. Um. I’m not really sure why you all came, but I mean there’s free food, so…” He trails off before finding the strength to continue. “I don’t know why the school let this happen but you’re all here and I have a painting to show you, so I hope you like it.”

Draco is muttering, “You need to work on your oratory abilities, Potter,” but Harry pays him no mind and strips away the covering on his canvas.

The room falls dead silent. The painting is large: roughly 3 x 5 meters. Snow falls from the sky in gentle patterns, swirling softly before landing on powder-sugar ground. Pieces of glittering flakes are tinged with hints of soft dark blue from the color of dawn meeting the morning. Ice crystals hang from a few tall snow covered trees and their gentle tinkling can be heard just barely. Golden sunbeams dance

between one crystal and the next, light reflecting outwards and granting the air a heavenly glow. One icicle is shaped like a prism and as the light passes through, it refracts as a rainbow, shimmering on the frigid air and bringing a small patch of snow into colour.

A few albino peacocks strut in the frame, their white feathers glinting gold and glazed with hints of pink from the rising sun. They move unhurriedly through the winter wonderland, surrounded by twinkling snowflakes and feathers flickering in the candlelight of a promised morning.

Harry shuffles nervously as the silence in the room extends past the minute mark while people stare at the painting in rapt attention. The first sound is made after three minutes. Professor Dumbledore stands up from a chair in which he had been attentively admiring the work and begins to clap.

And just like that, the spell is broken and the room is wracked with thunderous applause. People are coming forward and clapping Harry on the back. Students he hardly knows are telling him 'congratulations,' and showering him in praise. Oliver Wood seems to be fighting back tears and is telling anyone who will listen, "Best seeker in half a century, of course he has the hands of God."

McGonagall clasps Harry in a tight hug and he hears her say, "I'm proud of you, Harry," and he hadn't realized how much he'd wanted to hear those exact words. Apparently someone in the crowd is a reporter because they ask Harry if they can get a picture, to which Harry replies they can, and they shake their head and say, "I didn't believe it, but you sure made me the fool," as they snap a few photos.

Harry is approached by the delegation of goblins and told: "they would very much like to invest, come to Gringotts at your earliest convenience, Master Potter." The batty woman who smells like sherry seems to be nearly *convulsing* as she shakes Harry's hand and tells him, "soul sight is a forgotten gift, use it wisely," before drifting away and

shining like some kind of disco-ornament.

It is so overwhelming Harry ends up leaving the hall early and sits on the steps to wait until the craziness dies down. Hermione finds him moments later and leans her head against his knees.

They sit in companionable silence, content to close their eyes and allow the voices of a distant celebration wash over their ears. That is, until Draco finds them. The blonde Slytherin is unusually somber and quiet as he passes Harry a leather bag. Harry takes it in confusion and turns the bag over in his hands.

“Your payment, Potter,” Draco says almost angrily.

“Oh, right,” Harry replies, “I almost forgot about that part.” Harry opens the bag as Draco mutters things that sound like, “ *Gryffindors* ,” and “ *no sense at all, this one* .”

Harry examines the quantity of coins with concern. “You’ve overpaid me.”

Draco purses his lips looking distinctly uncomfortable. “A Malfoy always underpays,” he declares. “That’s 800 galleons, by the way, you’re probably too daft to count. Don’t spend it all in one place, Potter. That would be embarrassing, even for you.”

Harry tries to push the pouch into Draco’s hands but the boy won’t take it. “I said the price was 10 galleons, you can’t just pay me this much!”

Draco glares at Harry balefully and sniffs. “I can and I will.” He hesitates for a moment and then kneels down so that he is eye-level

with Harry on the steps. “Take pride in yourself,” he urges. “Or else you’ll remain the orphaned child running around until someone takes your head.” With that cryptic statement, he straightens and moves to go back into the reception. He calls over his shoulder, “Remember Harry, a Malfoy always *under* pays.”

Harry stares after him, mystified. Hermione shakes her head then lays a hand on his knee.

“This is only the beginning, you know that, right?” She asks him.

Harry inhales sharply and closes his eyes. He hears all the exclamations from the hall, “ *that’s my best friend, that is* ,” “ *you owe me 45 galleons,”* “ *he’s a master already, it’s unbelievable!* ” “ *Well believe it because Potter’s in our art class and we’ve seen him working on that for weeks* ,” and repeated so often it becomes a refrain, “ *He’s a prodigy.* ”

He exhales a long breath. “Yeah,” his voice is filled with equal measures of mourning and hope, “I know.”

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Sitting in his room at Privet Drive less than a day later, the showcase seems almost like a dream. The boy who wore robes of the finest silk and was approached by investors has no place sitting in a dusty room with years of grime and mocking barred windows.

With Dudley’s old castaways dwarfing his body, Harry feels like he is no longer a stranger to himself, he’s back to being “freaky Harry,” “that odd boy with broken glasses.”

He finds himself retrieving the diary from where he stashed it in his pillowcase, and turning it over and over in his hands, running his fingers along the worn leather cover. He takes a deep breath and opens it, leafing through all his drawings and imaginations. He hesitates and then takes out a pen and poises it over the paper.

He lets ink blots form on the page as he considers his words. Somehow, he can just tell that he has all of Tom's attention. Anticipation hangs heavy in the air and Harry needs to remember how to breathe. He feels as if Tom is still sitting on top of him, crushing his lungs, but he also feels like the older boy is covering him in butterfly kisses and treasuring him like he's something precious.

He writes, "I think I need more time." (It might be a lie, he hates waiting, he's been so alone.)

The ink sinks into the diary immediately and Harry tries not to focus on the disappointment roiling up his spine in crashing waves. He thinks at least some of it *is* his own.

The response is delivered in elegant script, "Take all the time you need. I will wait for you. I will wait *eternities* for you."

Harry closes his eyes against the image of Tom sitting alone in a barren world waiting decades before someone relieves his loneliness.

In an odd callback to the night Tom told Harry he would kill for him, Harry scrawls, "I would not want that from you."

Harry doesn't want Tom to exist in solitude for eons with no end. That kind of thing, no one deserves. Not even the boy who might have murdered Harry's parents if circumstances had been different (circumstances *weren't* different). Not even the boy who doesn't

breathe (but takes Harry's breath away) deserves to spend his time with nothing and no one.

"I miss you." Harry adds. He feels a small sob bubbling up and he shoves it down violently into his heart, burying it beneath a pile of vengeance. He does not deserve to cry over something like this. (Not when it's his fault.)

The diary begins to feel warm to the touch, like it is somehow immensely pleased.

"I miss you too, my darling," the cursive promises, "I'm here whenever you need me."

It takes Harry a long time to fall into a fitful sleep, and that night Harry hides in a newly discovered alcove built into the balcony of Astronomy tower. He looks at the odd night sky so full of stars Harry remembers drawing. He sees moonlight *he* crafted reflect off grass *he* grew and dip the edges of green blades in silver. His breath materializes in soft puffs of white in front of his half-closed eyes, and he realizes that even the wind is something he called into existence. It's almost frightening, being surrounded by so many of… *his creations.* It's like he fashioned a world out of only his dreams and the graphite from his pencils, as though he's god from Above come to reside over the masterpiece of this purgatory Below. *But I am no god, and I want no one's prayers.*

He hears the soft and sure footsteps of a boy in leather boots and decides that tonight he doesn't want to drift back to his desolate room alone. He unfurls himself from where he's crouching and exits his hiding place. As soon as he emerges, he sees Tom pause and hesitate, reaching out a hand as if longing for touch but looking so unsure of if he's allowed that mercy. Harry takes a step towards the older boy. Tom's eyes crinkle slightly, (like they always do when he's pleased and feeling fond,) and he mirrors Harry by taking just one step forward. That opens a floodgate of the longing and loneliness Harry's

been so used to clawing at his heart, and he thinks if he spends even one more minute on his own, he'll never recover. He begins to run, racing over the polished stone floor and hurtling himself into the opening arms of the older boy.

His back is clasped tight and, instinctively almost, he burrows his head into the firm chest. He never wants to let go. Tom kisses Harry's hair.

"Welcome back," he whispers.

Harry sniffles, allowing the comfort of the embrace to stretch on and on. He knows they have mere minutes together before morning will come and take him away. He doesn't want to leave, not yet, but… "I can't stay much longer."

Tom holds Harry tighter. "I know," he admits in a wistful tone, "But can we-- can we stay like this until you go?" His voice is unusually soft and quiet. *Vulnerable.*

Harry can't help the warmth that spreads from his scalp to his toes. He nuzzles Tom's neck. He wants to be cherished like this *so badly.* It doesn't even matter in that moment if it's all a lie. He'll drink this poison down like medicine, needing to feel, if only through deception, that he is loved. "...Yes."

They hold each other silently (desperately) until Harry slips away, hands still reaching for Tom, and opening his tear-filled eyes to sunrise in the world Above.

End Of Part One

Chapter End Notes

I've always felt like it must have been so hard for Harry to go from schoolyears looked at as a hero to summers looked at as a useless nobody. Thus ends part one of "Dripping Fingers." It will have I think five more parts, so six in total. One for every schoolyear, because this fic will hopefully go to the end of the war. There' a chance the AU will go very AU, but yeah. Look forward to good old Padfoot in the coming chapters. Anyways, there you have this chapter ladies and gentlemen and everyone in between. Leave a comment so I know I'm not just writing into the void.

More

Chapter Notes

> Hello again folks! Welcome to part 2 of Dripping Fingers.
> I cannot believe the response this work has been getting, but I am so grateful to all of you, my wondrous readers.
> If you'd like, check out my other work: Another Mind Game.
> Watch Snape turn into a nice person. A softie, you might say. But only for Harry.
> Thanks for being here on this journey!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Harry was little(er), he would wake up most mornings to the sound of Dudley clamoring down the steps with great *thump-thump-thumps,* and he would crack open one eye as a smattering of dust assaulted his bleary pupil. Each morning he sat in the dark cupboard, coughing silently around the cobwebs and scent of bleach, and he would attempt to smooth down his hair as far as it could go (which was not much because he was a Potter, after all). The sound of clicking locks alerted him it was time to get up, go out, and make breakfast. He'd slide past the great lump that made up his uncle, or the sharp bones that made up his aunt, attempt to block out their disdainful looks of judgment, and get cracking (pun intended) on the eggs and bacon for their darling Dinky Duddydums. After they had all eaten -- Harry less than half a plate compared to his cousin -- and he had washed up, he was sometimes allowed a shower.

It changed of course, after he was moved to a real room. It's much harder to wake up to *thump-thump-thumps* on groaning steps when you reside *above* the stairs. It's quite challenging indeed for Dudley to jump so hard dust falls into the eyes of the cupboard resident when the cupboard has *no* resident. (The large boy's not been creative enough to come up with alternatives.) The one constant Harry has grown used to is the sound of locks being turned and opened, the fast and sharp *click-clicks* that alert him it's time to start the day.

However, this morning he wakes before the locks on his door are touched. His eyes are a tad wet but that's to be expected: he's always

reaching for Tom and forced to get up alone. He wonders what it would feel like to once, just once, greet the morning with someone curled around him, holding him steady and kissing the top of his head. Maybe they'd watch the sunrise together, name the patterns of clouds against the pink horizon, watch as daybreak illuminated the world in warmth. He'd like it, he thinks.

The sunlight makes a valiant effort to shine through his grime streaked window, but it is fighting a losing battle, and only some stray (hardy) bits of gold creep their way between the dirt crusted glass and wooden planks boarding the window closed.

("Thought you could try an escape like last summer again, eh, boy?" Vernon had asked, mustache twitching dangerously. "Did this handiwork myself. Nothing gets in. Nothing gets *out* .)

The room smells of wet concrete and dead grass, and Harry sits on his lumpy mattress, counting down the minutes until he will have to get up and go make something for his "family." This summer he's been cutting up grapefruit and toasting bits of whole wheat bread because apparently not even his aunt and uncle could explain away the health report of their darling boy. "Big bones" as an excuse only gets you so far, and evidently it failed to justify Dudley's extra two stones of weight.

Vernon seems to have taken personal offense to Harry -- for being skinny or for serving produce, he doesn't know -- and yells at him with every presented opportunity. Dudley has followed suit, laughing at his cousin constantly and inviting Polkiss to join him in many a "Harry Hunting" expedition.

("Our boy is so popular," Aunt Petunia can be heard regularly gloating.)

Harry's taken to drawing in the diary, writing to Tom, and blocking out his time at Privet Drive as best as he can, looking forward with all his heart to his return to Hogwarts.

Two more months. He can make it.

When he hears the *click-click* of the locks being unlocked, one little turn at a time, he frowns. Uncle Vernon is practiced at letting the boy out of his make-shift jail cell with a well-timed flourish at the end of each bolt unfastening. But right now there is fumbling in every latch, the timing is all wrong… the triumphant rhythm is paced by hesitance.

And then he hears the knocking. The knocking sounds so reminiscent of the drumbeat that pounded in his head and forced the dust down into his eyes as they opened every morning of his childhood. He hears the *rap-rap-raps* loud and forceful like the *thump-thump-thumps* he will always hate.

Dudley.

Dudley is on the other side of that door.

Harry doesn't hide the diary away fast enough as his large cousin bursts in through the small door-frame. He catches Harry sliding the book into a pillowcase and his eyes brighten with a suspicious gleam.

He's caught Harry hiding something. This, to Dudley, must be very exciting. Harry never has anything worth looking at -- in Dudley's estimation -- except for the things his dad locks away in the cupboard every summer. Harry could get in very big trouble for hiding something if Vernon knew.

Dudley will either let his curiosity win and come look at the diary, or he will let his joy of seeing Harry suffer win, and go straight to his father. He might even look at the worn pages and then go to his father anyway. Harry doesn't know which outcome is the worst. All of them are bad options. Dudley can't seem to decide either.

Opting for being as uninteresting as possible to avoid any of the aforementioned scenarios, Harry tries to curb excitement by saying, "It's just a book, Dudley." If it's one thing Harry knows about his cousin, it's that the larger boy certainly does not care for books.

"What kind of book?" Dudley challenges, bouldering his way into the tiny space.

"The boring kind."

"I'll decide that, won't I?" Dudley reaches for the pillowcase but Harry grasps onto it with both hands and tugs it into his lap, folding over it protectively. Dudley snarls and shoves Harry roughly -- he swears he feels Tom's overwhelming anger, hot and bitter -- pushing him backward with a surprising amount of force. As the smaller boy's head smacks into the wall with a dull thwack, Dudley yanks the pillowcase from his cousin's slackened grip.

The diary clatters to the floor and Dudley bends over to pick it up, his labored breaths from exertion matching his younger cousin's pained exhales.

The rolls of fat prod at Dudley's clothing and folds of fabric stick together on his stomach, but as he straightens the shirt smoothes out and he holds the leather-bound book triumphantly, beady eyes scanning the exterior for signs of what he holds.

“What’s this then?” His voice takes on a mocking lilt, “Bitty Potter’s secret diary?” He laughs at Harry’s glare. “What are you, a girl?”

Harry grits his teeth. “Give it here, Dudley. You won’t like it. I’m boring aren’t I?”

But Dudley isn’t listening. Not one bit. He slumps down on Harry's bed, taking up almost half, and opens to a page at random.

“Let’s see what dirty secrets you’re hiding -- oh…” his voice trails off into silence as he stares at one of Harry’s flower fields, morning glories and geraniums overlapping and making little mazes for the red roses and white lilies to dance through.

“Did you -- draw this?” Dudley asks with a halting sort of voice.

Harry, feeling quite out of his element based on previous Dudley interactions (and perhaps thinking more slowly than usual due to a mild concussion,) manages a small nod.

Dudley lets out a rather forced scoff and asserts, “See, I always knew you were such a fucking pansy. Nothing manly about you.”

Harry rolls his eyes. “Right as always, Dudley. Though if you’re what it means to be a man, I think I’d rather stay right the way I am, thanks.”

Dudley ignores the comment (or perhaps did not understand it) and flips to another page: the drawing of the boat reflecting moonlight. He seems to lose all his words on the lake’s gentle breeze. He turns to

another page, and another, gulping down images of starlight and broomsticks and chocolate frogs and the great hall during feasts and … magic. The magic he's never been allowed to see. His eyes are full of greed. It's the look he gets when he wants something so badly he *has* to have it, and he'll take it and play with it until it breaks and it *always* breaks. (Except for the cat that ran away, the lucky bastard.)

And Harry always has to give Dudley whatever he wants. Always. It's a rule of the house. But Harry won't give up Tom. He won't give up a year of self-discovery and the world he made with just pencils, his fingers, and dreams as big as the universe.

He'll fight if he has to. For the right to create, he will always fight. "Dudley --" He begins in a warning voice.

Dudley shushes him and continues looking through the drawings, flipping from one page to the next in constant motion. An amazed smile begins to play at his lips. He looks like a child peering out of an airplane window for the first time in his life and realizing that for just a moment, he can fly.

And then, with no warning, he suddenly stops turning pages of the diary. He holds the book tightly as he stares at a single image. His smile is forgotten. He looks at the picture for a long time, running a thick finger over the parchment with an odd sort of… concern.

He bites his lower lip and his eyes are more somber than Harry's ever seen. It's an odd expression on his cousin's face. A lock of blonde hair falls into Dudley's eyes but he sweeps it away without noticing, still so intent on the image before him.

He's never been this focused on anything.

Harry notices flickering light on Dudley's face, as though from a small, warm fire.

And suddenly Harry knows -- he knows in the heart he's buried oh so deep -- that Dudley is looking at the drawing of the cupboard. The one drawing Hermione's never been allowed to see.

Dudley must be looking at the locks outside the door, the little spiders always in motion, the old cleaning supplies barely illuminated by the little fire that doesn't burn.

Maybe he's remembering fondly all the times he ran over the top of that sloped ceiling, causing that little lightbulb to flicker and go out, waking up Harry with his crashing *thump-thump-thumps.*

Harry's own heartbeat hammers a fast and bruising rhythm (*dum-dum-dum*) as he waits to see what Dudley will do. Mock him, most likely.

Dudley takes one last long, meaningful look at the drawing and closes the book gently, almost… reverently.

He tentatively gives it back to Harry without a word. Harry's hands close around it automatically as he stares at his cousin with wide eyes.

Dudley opens his mouth as though to say something, closes it, and then stands up. He raises a hand and slowly, slowly enough that Harry doesn't flinch, pats Harry's arm. Like he meant to shake his hand, maybe. It's an acknowledgment. Of what, Harry doesn't know.

Dudley gives him a sad smile. "I guess --" He stalls, fingers tapping a

frantic pace on his thigh: *tap-tap-tap* … but then he says, “I guess I didn’t need two bedrooms.”

It’s not an apology. (It didn’t have to be.)

It’s the best thing Harry’s heard all summer.

Dudley leaves the door unlocked behind him.

***

Tom’s earliest memory is of a crib crumbling at its sharp edges, panels of wood chipped and cracking down the middle, a few bars missing and gone like the inside of a young child’s mouth when they’ve begun to lose their teeth.

He’s sitting in that disgusting old crib, holding a ratty sepia-toned blanket decorated with the stains of children past, and smelling the crusty mold of the laundry room. (It was where they kept the little ones.)

He’s tired in this memory, his eyes are heavy and drooping. But he desires fervently something… *more.* He does not want to have only this itchy cloth draped around his body, this insignificant and dilapidated crib as his bed. He wants -- no -- he *deserves* more.

So he reaches a little chubby hand to the edge of his crib, curls his fingers around it, and *wishes* for there to be something more out there, anything beyond this horrific existence. And something answers. The bars of the crib fizzle to ash but the frame somehow cleans until the wood is gleaming. His blanket is replaced by a thick duvet.

He sits on his newly made big-boy bed, nestled contentedly in his soft quilt. It gives him his first taste of what it meant to have *more.* He is *powerful* enough that he can get it. He can go beyond the stone walls of a prison for children nobody wants. He is... unique in the best possible way.

In the morning he will be thought of as a demon, as the cold matron discovers a little boy sleeping in *her* duvet, his crib turned to ashes around his angelic features.

She takes his quilt and locks him in the attic but from then on Tom Riddle is never the same: he begins taking and taking… always looking for *more.*

*

When Harry first began to draw life in the world of the diary, Tom pretended he would never desire anything else. What more could he ask for besides the creation of divinity?

He had been converted to a new worshipful religion and he took his gifts with gratitude for their part in the destruction of his mundane, monotonous existence.

He got the boy's dreams, his waking thoughts, he was rapidly becoming one of Harry's most important… people. He was still... a person. To his artist, at any rate.

But as he sits with his legs submerged in the dark water of the lake, dusty surface reflecting the grey sky, he realizes that perhaps those feelings of contentment were only ever pretense.

He's not satisfied with what he has with Harry, not in the slightest. It is nowhere near enough. Only, he was concerned that perhaps once the boy knew who he was… *what* he was, that he would be abandoned.

The less time he spent pushing for more, the less likely Harry would have been to chance upon the discovery.

But his secret was discovered. The boy learned and yelled and… forgave. (And what a sweet taste forgiveness holds.)

He has not been abandoned. He has been *embraced*. And now, more than he desired Alison Goddal's rock collection and Edwin Messer's bonbons, (more than he desired for Abraxas Malfoy to sink to his knees and call a half-blood, "My Lord,") he wants, *needs,* ***more*** with Harry.

From this world Below he cannot touch the boy in real-time, feel soft skin warm beneath his fingers. He cannot use his wand to curse the "family," to which the boy has returned, protect him from their idiocy and thrust them into oblivion.

He is a passive observer to the marvel that is Harry Potter, and he has never been passive.

He will need to take someone's soul to come into the real world. Harry will never forgive him for it, but the boy doesn't need to know. The muggles are worthless to Tom, but someone -- when they go back to Hogwarts, perhaps -- will suffice as a source for power. He'll use a child's soul to make himself tangible and living. And once he has a heartbeat, he will find Harry and they will make their *life* together. (But then he'd have to lie again and --)

One of the fish in the lake splashes his face unexpectedly, and he blinks at the cold droplets. And then he senses, as though he were under the water, a large blubbering boy blundering his way in front of his Harry, precious Harry, and shoving him back until his head hits a wall.

Rage. He has not felt it for over fifty years. He had forgotten what it felt like. But as he sees this whale of a boy carelessly looking through this world -- full of his artist's masterpieces, he feels the sparks of an inferno of hatred ignite his frozen mind until his thoughts are ablaze.

Look, he goads the boy, *look at all this magic you will never get to keep. Look at all these wonders you can never hope to perform. There is a world of real magic and you are not special enough to be invited.*

And then he knows where he must guide this blubbering muggle. He draws the boy down into Harry's cupboard beneath the stairs. He pushes the loneliness, the desolation, the wishes for love that went unanswered onto the blonde baboon. *Feel what Harry felt. There is no warmth here, he had to make this fire because of how cold it was down here, day in and day out. Feel how trapped you are with too many locks on the outside of this door, as these spiders become your only friends, as you wonder if you are even alive as the lightbulb flickers off.*

Breathe in the scent of dirt and rubbing alcohol and moth-eaten coats. That's a cobweb tickling your neck. The bed is not even a bed, is it? Do you like this, boy? Is it fun? The only thing you have is this made-up fire you know was never real. That was all he had in here.

There is an echo of emotion that tumbles down through the pages and into Tom's heart. Sadness filled with regret.

A single thought rings clearly through the silent field.

My fault.

(Tom cannot tell if the thought is his own or not.)

Tom relaxes as the diary is clearly given back to Harry. He cannot help the wistful smile that spreads across his face when he is back in the hands of his most precious. He feels a grim satisfaction at the certainty the muggle is riddled with guilt. *He* deserves it. (Tom might too).

In an odd limbo of echoing emotion, Tom feels phantom confusion followed by a kind of elation. He can tell -- as though he received the memory through a thick fog -- that the muggle made a comment of mild repentance. And Harry, like the creature of forgiveness he is, finds joy in one simple admission.

See, Harry? See how happy you are when I take care of you? I could do so much more for you.

And so it returns with a vengeance, that itch to be a fully realized person, one capable of more than waiting trapped in decades of decaying memory.

Angered, Tom stands up from his place by the lake and paces the grounds, thinking over what he needs to do.

As he walks, he has an inkling that he is being trailed like a mother with a duckling. He turns and sees the magnificent albino peacock that entered this world only one week prior. Evidently, peacocks were an integral piece of the work his artist had been crafting for some patron of his masterpiece. (Harry refused to divulge for *whom* the

piece was being commissioned.)

He's named it Neige because he's not creative but he is at least cultured, and the dumb bird has taken to him to an alarming degree. It eats the grass and squawks at its reflection in the water, and it piteously begs Tom for cuddles. (If Tom sometimes indulges the dumb thing, it's only because Harry would approve, not because he's in need of touch or anything.)

He halts pacing immediately and focuses sharply on the bird. It cocks its head.

Neige… eats. He strides quickly forwards and bends to his knees in front of the peacock which preens under the attention. He places a hand on the bird's breast and startles.

It has a heartbeat.

It..no... *she* breathes.

Harry made a peacock in this world that is… *living* .

Abruptly, Tom feels like he needs to laugh and sob in equal measure. This has been in front of him from the very beginning.

It all started from the lonely tree with sodden bark and twisting branches. That willow tree was the beginning of the end to his solitary and colorless existence, but that tree was always a living thing. Undeniable proof that there was *more* beyond amortality in the diary.

There's life everywhere in this world now. Hogwarts here, once an imitation of memory, now is filled with bright lights and paper snowflakes that flit about the warm colored walls. There's a fire burning in the Gryffindor common room, and there are… real pots of aconite sprouting in the greenhouse. Wildflowers bud and bloom throughout the forbidden forest, making paths of sweet-scented beauty.

The once-frozen ground of the Quidditch pitch is filled in with green grass that grows, browns, and *dies.* (Everything that lives must die.) The spiders in the cupboard have gone on to other parts of the orphanage, spinning webs and devouring moths.

There are fish that glide through the lake and nibble on his toes when he swims. He's surrounded, he realizes, by the breath of life. It's been ghosting at his fingertips for *months.*

The world is vibrant now. All things have been brought into the cycle of mortal existence. They are all *real* . (Everything but him.) It's… beautiful. Life is unbelievably beautiful. Fragile, like the wings of diamond crusted butterflies adorning morning dewdrops (a new addition,) but glimmering with the undauntable spirit of taking chances with every inhale, *shining* with the choice to grow wiser with every exhale.

But that means… that means… Harry can create *life.* If he can make it here in the world Below, he can make it up there in the world Above.

If Harry just draws him, *no* , if they draw Tom *together* then maybe, (maybe,) he can see what it means to be alive again.

He opens a page of the diary and takes out a quill.

For the first time he does not write ‘Hello,’ or ‘good morning,’ or ‘how are you, Harry?’ He does not write anything at all.

He draws.

His quill spreads black strokes over the page, mimicking his soft and well-groomed hair, strands whipping in an unseen breeze. His movements are clumsy and uncoordinated, his fingers are dripping midnight from ink, but all he can think is how this has been staring at him the whole time.

His hand aches just right, like he can feel it, like he is living; his spine reverberates with the sensation that he is no longer just a shadow of a person (a pale imitation of a man) but that this is proof he is, he *will* be… ***more*** .

Chapter End Notes

> Did anyone see this coming? I've been leaving some hints in previous chapters. Also, a very important thing happened in chapter 4 and it will be referenced later in this series, so brownie points to anyone who figures that out.
> Stay tuned for a mangy mutt (and Marge Dursley) next chapter.
> Please leave a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void. Also because your words are glorious.

Magic

Chapter Notes

> Well this has blown up, hasn't it? I can't believe how many views I've gotten and how many kudos I have. I feel a bit like I'm dreaming every time I look at this fic.
>
> Thank you to all of my readers, and double thanks to all my commenters. This has been the experience of a lifetime, and I love you all for it.
>
> Check out my other fic, "Another Mindgame," for a ridiculous parental snape in a rather more crack-like world.
>
> Thank you, everyone, you are all gems.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry's birthday comes with an insistent tapping of Errol on the windowpane, four letters clutched tightly in his beak and a desperation to get inside. The moon catches the ends of his plumage in a loose grip, illuminating the edges of his feather-duster wings with tints of forgotten winter. The owl makes a series of strange hoots as Harry begins to carefully remove the wooden boarding on his window. (He uses a series of tricks the Weasley twins taught him.) As soon there is space for her body to pass, Hedwig careens out into midnight whilst clucking dispassionately.

The overworked Weasley owl slugs its way inside as Harry opens the window a bit farther and promptly slumps down on Harry's pillow (his one good pillow) to take a short nap. Harry sighs and sits down at the edge of his mattress as Hedwig returns bearing several packages, evidently dropped by Errol on his journey.

Using a torch some random large black dog brought him when they were playing fetch at the park, (he's started calling the mangy thing Paddy for reasons he can't quite name,) he quickly goes through the packages.

Hermione got him a broom servicing kit, Ron got him a Sneakoscope (Harry will endeavor to keep it far away from Vernon because he doesn't need help with *that* one,) and Hagrid got him a terrifying book that starts to scuttle under the bed as soon as Harry opens the package. McGonagall sent him gossamer paints attached with a simple note that reads, " *Mr. Potter, it takes only patience and color to change the world."*

He goes to bed dreaming of the ocean, spends the night sketching in the Gryffindor common room, and wakes up with his forehead tingling, Tom's lips pressing above his brow and deep voice whispering, "Happy Birthday, Harry Potter."

*

When he opens his eyes to the grey light of a rainy morning, he realizes all at once that something is wrong. No fewer than eight owls are perched in the tiny space of his room, all of them with tilted heads and packages beneath their talons. He blinks slowly and notices Hedwig directing -- through sharp pecking -- a ninth owl that flies in through the window to go join the other eight on a groaning bookshelf.

As Harry sits up, dragging a hand through his unruly bedhead, he reaches for his spectacles and slides them onto his nose. There, piled in haphazard formations across the bedroom floor, are numerous parcels, all gift-wrapped and attached with notes.

One package appears to be floating dangerously high to the ceiling, and another is doing somersaults. One card seems to be humming a tune that reminds him of the cacophony that comes with singing the Hogwarts song, and another card isn't a card at all, but rather something that looks like compressed starlight spelling out, "Happiest of Birthdays to you, Harry."

It's a bit overwhelming.

The nine -- no ten now -- owls that are congregated seem to be waiting for Harry to direct them where to leave their packages as there is no longer any room on his floor.

Harry sighs and motions to his bed, and one by one, the owls lay down their burden(s) and fly back into the drizzling sky. Errol is still on Harry's pillow, but he worked hard, carrying those four letters and dropping his packages. Errol's *elderly*.

He looks at the haphazard glittering mess that is the room and does the only thing he can think of: crawls under his bed to avoid the disorder and ignore what's happening around him. It's his *birthday* and this is *too much* and he will not deal with it right now.

But the world has other plans, of course, because as soon as he's sliding into that comforting darkness, away from the cornucopia of presents, he hears the fumbled unlatching of the youngest Dursley.

So naturally, just as he's sticking one head out from underneath his bed, (and realizing that the book is damn scary and possibly trying to bite off his nose,) Dudley slams open the door and tumbles into the room, shouting, "HAPPY BIRTHDAY LITTLE COUSIN!!!"

Then Dudley blinks slowly at the scene in front of him: the dancing and twinkling boxes reflecting golden light and dazzling rainbows, an open window with wooden boards tossed to the sides, and Harry halfway beneath the bed.

For a moment, Dudley's jaw drops open and he freezes. Then he looks behind him at the empty hallway visible through the open doorway.

He closes the door impossibly gently.

He sits down with his back to the wall, chin on his knees, and *stares.*

Harry pulls the rest of the way out from underneath the bed and dusts off his oversized grey sleepshirt (one of Dudley's castaways) in a vain attempt to maintain his dignity. (It's been gone for a long time if he's being honest.)

The first thing Dudley says is, "You're letting the rain in."

It's clearly not what he wanted to say, but Harry nods like it is a perfectly reasonable response to the chaos and says, "Yeah, right, sorry. That's my bad," and goes and closes his window.

Dudley is still just staring blankly at everything. "Um," he mumbles intelligently (like the brilliant boy he is,) "um!"

Harry fiddles with the corner of an overlarge sleeve. "Yes, Dudley?"

Dudley swallows. "I um, I wanted to say 'Happy Birthday,' to you, you know? I don't think -- I've not done that -- before today, that is. To you. I've not ever said it to you. And - and - you've told me every year. So. So! Happy birthday. You know. To you."

He nods vigorously as though his words encapsulate everything he's ever thought in the whole of his existence and tracks the floating package with a high amount of interest. It *preens.*

"... Thanks." The room is quite small, so Harry scooches forward just slightly and rests a comforting hand on Dudley's shoulder for a small moment before letting it drop.

Dudley nods again. "Are these -- these for you?"

Harry sighs. "I'm guessing they are."

Dudley's eyes widen. "Is it always like this? With you people?"

"I mean, I'm not sure what you mean by 'you people,' but I've never gotten this many gifts before, so no, it's not always like this."

Dudley shakes his head. "Magic." He breathes like this is a whole sentence, "Is it -- always -- like this?"

"Magical, you mean?" Harry questions with amusement.

"Yeah, is it always so shiny and magic-ish?"

Harry laughs a little. "I guess so."

Dudley bites down on his lips and asks with the wonder only someone who is still a child can hold, "Can you open some of them? While I'm here. I won't take them, promise, I just want to see. Please, Harry? Pretty please?"

Harry wants to say no, but he can see the quiver in Dudley's mouth that is the sign of a burgeoning tantrum, and he can feel the subtle manipulations of "I'm nice now so you should give me what I want," laced in every spoken syllable and… it might not be so bad to have someone with him on his birthday, for once.

So against his better judgment, Harry says yes. And he regrets it when Dudley won't stop asking questions and asking to hold things, like the miniature crystal broomstick Oliver Wood got him, and the everlasting butterbeer mug from one remarkably attentive Beatrice Haywood, and the floating parcel which turned out to be a toy flying carpet that Dudley just won't *let go*.

It seems like everyone and their mother's sent Harry gifts as payments for the doodles he's made for fun in class, or the random little cartoons he draws sometimes of people when they're studying and he's taking a break. (It's only fair that he gets to draw anyone because almost everyone at some point will come and watch him while he sketches out the tired smiles of that one fifth-year Hufflepuff study group and the matching dimples of that sixth-year couple who are so clearly in love.) He always gives his subjects the drawings, if they want them. (They always do.)

All the gifts have notes wishing him a happy birthday, praising him, and asking him how much he charges for his works, and would he make them one, they'd do almost *anything*. The goblins sent him a business card and the ominous words, "We're expecting you very shortly." They also attached a kind of Goblin sweet that looks like rock candy, so Harry gives some to Dudley to try first.

The larger boy accepts the offering without question, examining the oddly lilac color of the treat, and then pops it in his mouth. His eyes go huge and his face turns red as he exclaims in an unnaturally smooth voice, "they taste like being a celebrity."

Harry has no idea what to say to that, but decides he'll wait to try

them before he consults Hermione. She'll know if they're safe or not. (He might ask Draco too because Draco is good at potions and forgets to be a prat sometimes.)

They've worked through most of the presents; paints, and canvases and clay (Harry's going to try sculpting,) and exotic plants, (thanks Neville,) and even some spelled malleable glass. There are heaps of candies, some of which Harry gives to Dudley and some of which he hides while his cousin isn't looking.

He gets many articles of clothing, nice quality cloaks and trousers and robes, and three pairs of designer muggle jeans, which Dudley eyes enviously but very obviously would not fit.

"I didn't know you had friends," the larger boy remarks casually at some point.

Harry is separating the items he needs to send with Hedwig to Gringotts for storage from the ones he can keep with him at Number Four for the rest of the summer.

He pauses his folding of one of the fleece jumpers some random Ravenclaw sent him -- they're all blue, of course -- and rubs the back of his neck.

"I get that," he replies, "It's not like I had any here."

For some reason, that makes Dudley's face go dark, and he says earnestly, with his cheeks covered in Harry's chocolate and his hands still clasping the toy flying carpet, "I'll be your friend. From now on. Me." He puffs up as though he's just offered a solution to world hunger and it absolves him from having starved at least half a dozen orphans.

Harry pats his arm this time. “Thanks, big D.”

Dudley *beams.*

It’s such a childish response to guilt and forgiveness that Harry can’t help but feel charmed, and he feels himself smiling before he’s really thought it through.

After the intricacies of Tom, Dudley’s simple nature is refreshing. He’s just Dudley, blundering his way through life as best as he can. (And breaking most things and people in his path, but no one’s perfect.)

Just Dudley. Good old Dudley.

His room is decorated with the painting Harry gave him for his birthday. It’s a pair of red boxing gloves on a stone patio at dawn, the sunlight breaking through to summer grass and fireflies spilling out of a sideways glass jar.

It’s not magical, not really -- nothing moves at least -- but it still smells like freshly turned earth and new leather. Dudley adores it, and ever since it got put up on his walls, he’s started trying to treat Harry like a person he might care about. (Maybe he does. Care about Harry, that is.)

Harry opens the final letter and it’s from Hogwarts. It’s a school list, class schedule, and… a permission slip. To Hogsmeade. That Aunt Petunia and Uncle Vernon certainly won’t sign. But to go with the other third years and drink the butterbeer at Honeydukes Beatrice always brings back to him on days she *knows* he hasn't left the art den, that would be a dream come true.

He must be frowning because Dudley, voice no longer oddly smooth and back to its typical tinny tone inquires, “What’s wrong with you then?”

Harry hands over the permission slip which Dudley glances at with confusion. “I need a signature from a guardian.” He lets his shoulders slump with exaggerated helplessness.

Dudley brightens. “Mum’ll sign it for you. She signs loads for me all the time.”

Harry gives his cousin a beaten down smile. “She won’t for me, though. It’s alright.”

Dudley stands up, holding the Hogwarts letter but letting the flying carpet go. It drifts to the ground in a manner that can only be described as despondent.

“I’ll ask her to. She will.”

Harry rolls his eyes but follows Dudley out of the tiny bedroom and into the pristine halls with their ugly yellow floral wallpaper and down the creaking stairs, (*thump, thump, thump)* and into the living room.

Aunt Petunia is standing with her head halfway out the window and listening as Mrs. Number Three talks about her tragic miscarriage with a visiting cousin. Uncle Vernon’s at work already.

She turns when she hears Dudley, exclaiming, “Good morning ickle Duddy Ims.” She smiles lovingly at her son, and then her gaze turns stony when she looks at Harry. “Boy.”

Harry tries to smile in a non-threatening manner. “Good morning, Aunt Petunia.”

Dudley swaggers forward and says, “Harry needs you to sign this.”

What Harry needs is to smack his head into a wall. *Really Dudley? Ever heard of subtlety?*

“He doesn’t need anything from me.” Aunt Petunia claims. “He’s gotten plenty already.”

That was to be expected. Honestly, big D.

Dudley is undeterred. “He just needs you to sign this.” He holds up the flapping permission slip.

Aunt Petunia looks at her son with all the adoration she can muster in her bony body. “Darling, I’m not going to sign whatever this is for the boy. Their lot is only ever bad news. You know that.”

“But, Mummy,” Dudley begins to whine in his high-pitched wail, “you sign things for me all the time!”

“That’s different.”

“It’s just a piece of paper. Can’t you sign one piece of paper? I don’t understand. Why is so-so different? Can’t-- can’t you just do -- do this,” Big fat crocodile tears are beginning to leak out of Dudley’s eyes. He pulls out the greatest weapon in his arsenal, “for me?”

Aunt Petunia stands in horror for a full minute before she extends a hand. “Give it here then.”

Dudley passes the slip, tears long forgotten and abandoned.

“Well, what are you waiting for?” Aunt Petunia addresses Harry, “Get me a pen, boy.”

He runs to the kitchen and pulls out a black ballpoint, scarcely believing his luck.

He returns and passes it to his aunt who does not spare him a glance, merely signing the paper as quickly as possible and tossing it to the floor. Harry reaches out and picks it up.

“Thank you.”

Aunt Petunia gives him a stiff nod. “Just be good when Marge comes, boy.”

Excitedly, Dudley rambles, “Now you can go off and do whatever magic--”

With that word, everything about Aunt Petunia shifts. Her eyes alight with fury and she advances on Harry.

“What. Have. You. Been. Telling. My. Son?”

Harry is shaking his head. “Nothing, Aunt Petunia.”

Dudley grabs her sleeve. “It’s fine mum. The flying carpet was really friendly.”

Harry is going to die now, because of Dudley.

If Harry’d thought Aunt Petunia was mad before, she’s burning with hellfire now.

“You showed *what* to my son?”

“Um..”

“I can’t even look at you right now. Out. I want you OUT! Go to your room and stay there and no food today and no food tomorrow and nothing for that freakish owl either. I promised that if I ever heard a word of this disgusting thing again, so help me, family or no, I would just...” It seems she is so upset she's lost the ability to keep speaking, and she raises a hand to strike him, and it whistles through the air. He closes his eyes expecting sharp pain, but at the last second her hand hesitates and so it hits his face with a soft tap. His eyes open as she drops her arm. She is breathing heavily and her face is overcome with a kind of age-old anguish.

“Just go, Harry. Back to your room. You’ve done enough.”

He goes. He hears Dudley saying, hesitantly, “Mum--” and Petunia saying,

“Not now, Dudley. I know it looks bright and shiny and wonderful, but it kills you. He could have killed you, do you understand?”

“It’s not like that mum. It’s *beautiful.* ”

Harry sits at the top of the steps to listen.

“It looks beautiful. You can’t help but want to be a part of it, right?”

There’s no response, so Harry assumes Dudley nodded.

“I know, I know,” Aunt Petunia’s voice is surprisingly soft. “But it just looks that way. We're normal people, you and me. I won’t have that nonsense in my house.”

“It’s not nonsense.”

“It is. Normal people die of strokes and pneumonia and heart attacks when they're quite old. Normal people don’t get murdered with sticks flashing bright green when they’re just starting life. I know how much you want to be a part of that world, I do Dudley, but they kill each other and they kill themselves and they don’t realize it’s happening because of how pretty it looks when they die. So I won’t have it in my house and it’s not something to wonder about in your mind. Do you understand me?”

“Is that why you put Harry in the cupboard?”

Harry startles at the question.

“What do you mean?”

“It’s just, you’d never put me in the cupboard.”

“You’re different, Dudley. Of course, I’d never put you in the cupboard.”

“I was just thinking,” Dudley mumbles in a dejected tone, “about what would have happened if you and dad’d been the ones who died.”

“We’re alive and well sweetums.”

“I know that!” Dudley sounds angry. “I know that.” He repeats. “It’s just -- what if you’d been the ones who died and I was sent to live with Harry and his parents?”

Harry can see it then, in front of his eyes. A muggle boy living in a magical world, not being able to fly the baby broomsticks Harry zooms around on day in and day out.

“And what if -- what if his family kept *me* in a cupboard, because I wasn’t like them?”

“You’re here with me, Dudders. Don’t worry about that.”

“It wouldn’t have been decent, to keep me in a cupboard. Even though I’m not like them. Right?”

Aunt Petunia seemed to be considering her words carefully. “No, Dudleykins, you’d never deserve that.”

“So why’d we do that to Harry?”

Aunt Petunia is silent again for a while. “He’s dangerous, darling.”

“He’s only ever used **it** to run away from me. Maybe *I’m* dangerous.”

“Don’t say that.”

“Do you think his parents would have kept me in a cupboard?”

“Yes.” It’s said quickly. “Their lot hates us.”

“Are you sure? They’d lock me up just for being me?”

Aunt Petunia sighs. “Am I sure?” Harry hears her pointed fingernails clinking against a teacup. “...No.” She pauses and then, “I don’t -- know. James was--” Harry leans forwards. He’s never heard Aunt Petunia talk about his parents before. “James was arrogant and idiotic, so perhaps he might have, but then again he’d probably have done whatever Lily wanted.” Aunt Petunia’s voice becomes strained,

“And Lily… I don’t think she’d ever,” Aunt Petunia takes a shuddering breath, “Lily would… never have put any baby in a cupboard.”

Dudley seems to have no response. Harry hears the sound of a chair being moved and he assumes his aunt is standing up. “It’s different though, my darling. You’d never have been able to hurt them.”

He thinks he hears Dudley mutter, “Harry’s never hurt me,” but he’s already backing away into the hallway.

He goes into his room and closes the door silently. His mind is swimming with the image of a woman with deep red hair and emerald eyes holding him close. She’s whispering sweet words of love and Dudley is like a brother, and… He sits in his too-small bedroom looking out at the folded clothing, piles of cards, shining gift wrapping, and splintered wooden bars and -- he cries.

***

It’s raining again, so his artist is crying. Tom is disturbed by this revelation. The *muggles,* (the word tastes like ash in his mouth) do not deserve to have Harry in their home. They do not deserve to see his luminous green eyes and casual smiles and to hear the honey tone of excitement in his voice.

And they -- these hateful creatures -- tear his artist limb from limb with their words and hatred and deep-seated on fears that are unfounded when it comes to Harry.

It’s like they don’t know you at all, do they? You can’t hurt anyone. That’s why you need me. To look out for you.

Tom carefully pulls all the pillows he can find in the Gryffindor common room (Harry prefers it here to the Slytherin dormitory and Tom can tolerate a great deal for his treasure,) and makes a kind of fort for keeping in the warmth.

He arranges all the little decorations and trinkets Harry's drawn for him around the room, hanging up glittering paper snowflakes and golden vines to make the room look like a scene from a cliché fairytale.

He also grabs soft towels for his artist for when he arrives, something with which to watch his face. He would have liked to bring up some flowers, but all the flowers have died.

So has the grass. Neige seems to be sick, and croons pitifully in pained anguish for much of the day, or falls into deep and undisturbed sleep.

Some nights, Tom's hands seem to make contact with Harry in the real world now. The portrait they've been working on during Harry's nights is nearly finished.

Some nights, Tom's hands go right through Harry during these dreams, and all he can do is stare and wish to hold the boy in his arms once more.

Harry arrives with red-rimmed eyes and puffy cheeks. Tom rushes to embrace him but finds himself too insubstantial, and he curls around Harry like mist.

Harry gives him a trembling smile. "I wish I could touch you," he says wistfully.

Tom smiles sharply. “Soon, my dear. Soon.” Tom guides the boy by his elbow (Harry follows despite the lack of physical touch) to the little pillow palace he crafted.

Harry looks around, bemused. “What’s all this?”

“You’re sad.” Tom declares. “This is to make it better.”

Harry laughs, warm and rich, and Tom decides he likes that sound better than the whimpers of his knights of Walpurgis when he punishes them.

“That’s not how cheering people up works, Tom.”

“Is it not?” The Slytherin arches a brow, “it looks like it’s working to me.”

Harry settles into the pillows and lets out a happy sigh. “Let’s just keep working on your portrait, you damn sop. I’m plenty cheerful.” His cheeks are flushed bright pink. *Adorable.*

Tom tries to run a hand through Harry’s hair and relishes at the ghost sensation of something delightfully soft. “Of course, sweetheart. Did I ever tell you about that time I invented a new potion to heal a wickerbear cub?”

Harry pulls out his charcoal pencil and Tom hands him the dream world diary. The younger boy begins to draw, “No, you haven’t yet,” he says before biting his lips in concentration.

Tom chuckles, “Well I’d always known that an indebted wickerbear would be simply instrumental to…”

They fall into an easy companionship, Harry sketching out the intricacies of Tom’s hands, while the Slytherin tells humorous stories of his life. (If they’re not always a perfect truth, what does it matter? It’s who he’d like to have been, for his artist.) When Harry leaves in the morning, he’s much happier and his tears are long forgotten. Tom’s body is nearing translucent and the outside air hangs heavy with the scent of rotting fruit.

The willow tree is beginning to die.

***

Marge Dursley always reminds Harry that no matter how little Aunt Petunia likes him, and no matter how much Vernon hates him, it can always be worse.

The house smells of stale perfume and burped up whiskey, the two fragrances intermingling and combining in a gross parody of a kiss.

Her voice seeps through the pores of the wall with its grating judgment, seeping underneath the crack of Harry’s door and inescapably crawling into his ears.

He hears it over the creaking stairs and pattering rain and running water as he washes the dishes in the sink.

Engorged from a dinner of Harry’s making, sitting with her feet on the

coffee table and her dog Ripper nipping at everyone's ankles, Marge turns her assessing gaze on him.

"Are they caning you enough, boy?"

Vernon laughs from next to her, like this is some great joke.

Ears burning and tongue bit halfway off, Harry manages an even-toned, "Oh, yes. They cane me nearly every day."

Marge scoffs. "Only nearly? I'd expect they'd do it more. You need it."

Vernon grins. "Well, they also use the ruler, don't they boy?"

"Yes, Uncle Vernon."

"Well, that's better then," Marge remarks, "They're doing you a favor you know. Better be grateful. You come from such an odd family, you need the strangeness beaten out."

Harry doesn't respond. Aunt Petunia grips the edge of her teacup so hard her knuckles turn white. Dudley is looking between Marge and Harry with a frown.

"Harry's fine." He tries.

Marge ruffles his hair. "Oh, you're such a good boy, Dudders. All grown up and forgiving. Such a fine young man."

She smiles at Vernon. “You’ve done such a good job raising this one.”

Vernon smiles and pats Dudley on the back. “Couldn’t be prouder.”

“Shame you had to take in that one,” Marge laments with a glance at Harry as she tosses a bone to her dog, “needlessly kind too.”

Aunt Petunia sips her tea with a blank expression and Harry methodically dries the plates.

“But even with you doing the best you can, it’s not doing much, is it?” She laughs.

Vernon guffaws, “He’s not exactly a model boy, is he?”

Marge purses her lips thoughtfully, “Well you know what they say,” she stage-whispers conspiratorially causing Dudley to lean in closer, “when something is wrong with the bitch, something is wrong with the pup.”

The dishes rattle around Harry as he tries to reign himself in, but the sound is lost to Marge and Vernon as Aunt Petunia slams down her teacup so hard it cracks.

“I’ve forgotten to water the roses if you would excuse me.” She stands up and smoothes down her dress.

“It’s already the evening, dear,” Marge points out.

“Have the boy do it,” Vernon jerks in Harry’s direction.

Aunt Petunia continues her path to the door. “Oh,” she pauses for a moment, “I couldn’t trust him with the *roses.* ” She leaves for the yard, the door clanging behind her.

Marge shrugs and relaxes back on the cushions.

“She’s so finicky about her plants, isn’t she?”

Vernon pops a handful of chocolate almonds in his mouth. “Guess so,” he says around the food.

Dudley follows his father’s example and begins anxiously eating the chocolate almonds one at a time, looking apologetically at Harry.

“I still can’t believe you took a no good like him in.”

Vernon swallows. “It wasn’t really my choice, to be honest. He’s just a waste of space.”

Harry breathes and pats the pocket of his trousers, magic ones with expanded pockets, that fit his wand and the diary. He runs a hand along the cover of the leatherbound book to ground himself and tunes out the words. He tries to let them run over him like water.

The kitchen is clean.

Harry is going to go upstairs and away but then Marge says, “Bet you don’t expect much from him, with his parents being alcoholics that got too drunk with him in the car, and crashed like the reckless trash they were.”

It takes him by surprise how angry he is at that moment. It floods his veins with fire and he feels like Icarus, flying too close to the sun, wings melting off his back as he *burns*.

“Don’t talk about my parents like that. You know nothing.” His voice shakes with fury and his face is twisted. He glares at Marge with all the loathing he’s been building up for years, all the detestation he’s never allowed himself to manifest.

Her eyes open comically large as she begins to expand and float like a grotesque hot air balloon. (Not at all like the pale pink one he painted on a blue sky rising into clouds of cotton candy.)

Vernon is pointing at him now with fear and fury, advancing with murder in his eyes. “WHAT HAVE YOU DONE, YOU FREAK?”

Dudley is gaping and looking at Harry like he’s never seen him before. Maybe he hasn’t.

Without thought, Harry runs out of the house and tears across the yard. Just as he’s about to race into the street, a bony hand catches his wrist.

“Where are you going?” Aunt Petunia demands, expression frenzied

and pained.

“Away. I can’t stay here.”

“And where will you go?” She asks.

“Anywhere.” He tugs at his wrist but she refuses to let go.

“It’s not safe out there for you!” She hisses.

Vernon opens the door and bellows, “BOY! GET BACK HERE!” His face is so red it has turned nearly purple and it is rippling with the force of his words.

“It’s not *safe* for me *here* .” Harry spits. Neighbors are starting to peek through their windows at the yelling man at Number Four and that no-good deadbeat boy.

He tugs his wrist again and this time Aunt Petunia lets him go.

With darkness advancing on him like a cloak and a large black dog that joins him almost immediately, Harry runs.

Chapter End Notes

Sooo... thoughts? Feelings? Emotions? Leave a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void, and don't forget to drop a kudos if you feel so inclined. 🤍🤍🤍🤍

Wake

Chapter Notes

My dudes! 30K hits??? Am I dreaming?

Thanks to all of you. You may leave me kudos and comments, but know that I love you all and would leave each and every one of you your own kudos if I could.

Stay safe and keep reading! Teeehee

PSA: A few commenters expressed concern about one aspect of the story. To clarify, Harry's trunk is still at the Dursley's. Many of Harry's magical gifts were sent to Gringotts with Hedwig. There will be no random appearance of said trunk. It will have to be retrieved. (Thanks for coming to my ted-talk you gorgeous, gorgeous, humans.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

His heart is splintering, Harry thinks, or breaking and reforming, like a butterfly emerging from its chrysalis. As he runs, layers upon layers of graphite are being peeled away and smashed together and he… he knows he will not have a heart of discarded pencil shavings forever.

This is a moment when he makes a choice for himself -- for his family -- to be someone who stands up to degradation and says, “I’m a person too.” He’s not apologizing for the magic that runs through his veins. This is a moment when he is not grey and waiting to be filled in. This is the first time he’s painted himself into vibrant technicolor.

He’s leaving the cupboard behind now.

He’s not that cowering little boy any longer.

Right now, with a world in his pocket and a dog (a friend, an old

friend) by his side, he is finding himself.

Street lights illuminate the suburban neighborhood in muted tones of orange. Shadows melt into the street, dripping from identical buildings, each black pool sucking the light down, down, into flat depths. It is silent and only Harry's footfalls break up the utter lack of noise.

He knows by now he's run further than Vernon could ever dream -- though the man may not have followed Harry at all -- and he wonders if anyone back at Privet drive will miss him. Dudley might, but then again, Dudley looked shell-shocked when Harry'd blown up Aunt Marge.

Oh my god. I just blew up Aunt Marge. I just -- blew her up. I didn't even think about it.

When Harry finally stops running, he's on the corner of some street and some other street: it's too dark to tell. He's breathing heavily and needs to orient himself to figure out where he is so he can get to a bus stop. *Does the bus even run this late at night?* It isn't too terribly cold -- just dark and threatening to rain again. *I could stay the night at the stop, catch a bus early in the morning.*

He pulls his wand out of his back pocket and casts a Lumos above his head to look at one of the signs… and a bus comes. Immediately.

It is the strangest bus Harry has ever seen. It's a double-decker… *no that's at least three stories…* and rather purple. It shouldn't be able to be so purple given the lack of light, but the bus just exudes purple like it's an emotion and the vehicle is feeling it quite strongly.

The bus seems almost smug as it opens its door on a gobsmacked

Harry. He gapes at it. The driver, a somewhat unattractive older teen in a tattered overcoat and smart cap, gives Harry an incredibly judgemental once-over. The driver sits on what looks to be a decaying armchair that is valiantly clinging to life, and the interior of the bus is well lit, with a few other passengers on beds. They look… relieved that the bus has stopped.

"You's getting in, then?" The driver asks in a heavy accent.

Harry looks at the street beside him and then back at the driver. *This is far from the strangest thing that's happened to me.* "Erm, do you allow dogs?"

The driver looks at Paddy. "11 sickles for the both of yeh, best be getting in, eh?"

Harry nods and steps up onto the bus, Paddy loping beside him without any prodding. He reaches into his pockets and pulls out a small wallet filled with wizarding currency he got as a gift and hands the driver 22 sickles.

"Smart dog you get there. Name's Stan Shunpike." He offers his hand.

Harry takes it. "Thanks. Neville Longbottom." He flattens his hair over his scar. *Sorry, Neville. You're not the one being hunted by a murderer.*

***

When Harry stumbles into the Leaky Cauldron, he decides that the Knight Bus could be used as a torture technique . He'd rather clean out Professor Snape's cauldrons with a toothbrush than subject himself

to the rattling and spinning and deafening and generally nausea-inducing experience that is (was) the Knight Bus.

Paddy, meanwhile, seems to have enjoyed the ride and is bouncing with ebullient energy. Harry resists the urge to glare at the mangy mutt, and instead opts for patting his head and saying, “good boy.” Paddy seems equal parts pleased and offended and nods as though claiming, “naturally,” and then nips at Harry’s fingers as though chastising, “but don’t talk to me like I’m a *dog.”*

Harry rolls his eyes and says, “But you are a dog, Paddy,” entirely unconcerned that he looks to be talking to a dog. It’s not as if anyone cares about how *Neville Longbottom* acts in public.

But as he pushes past the entryway into the Leaky Cauldron, a larger than average man who looks like a constipated Uncle Vernon stands from where he had been huddled and then just seems to fold on himself with relief.

“Harry! Oh, thank Merlin. You’re alright! You’re alright.” The man pushes forward and takes Harry’s face between both his overlarge hands, turning it this way and that as though inspecting it for injury.

Harry frowns. “Um. Sir. Would you -- I mean, could you -- could you please stop touching me?”

The man drops his hands quickly and looks at the young boy with an apologetic smile. “I’m terribly sorry. We were all just so worried about you. Come, come, I’ll buy you dinner and we can have a nice long chat, you and I.”

Harry shrinks back slightly. “I’m sorry sir, I don’t think that’s wise. I don’t know you, and well --”

He breaks off as the man chuckles. “Oh, that’s my fault. Minister of Magic, Cornelius Fudge, at your service, Mr. Potter.”

He gives Harry a slight bow which Harry returns. “...Right.” Minister Fudge, seeming inordinately pleased with himself, clasps his around Harry’s elbow and half-guides, half-drags the Gryffindor to a quiet table in the back of the Leaky.

On their way to the table, Harry notices at least half a dozen men and women in red robes watching the scene with avid attention. “Who are they?” He asks the minister, jerking his head in the direction of a man and woman, sitting like sentinels.

Fudge looks at the table with a dismissive expression. “Aurors. They’re, well, they’re what muggles call ‘po - lice’ or some such but for the magical world.”

Harry nods and allows himself to be drawn into a booth.

Fudge sits down across from him and requests from Tom, the barman, *a butterbeer for young Harry here, and a firewhisky for myself if you please.*

The minister bounces his knee for a moment and wipes his face with a maroon handkerchief. He clears his throat. “You’ll be glad to know that we’ve set your aunt to rights and wiped her memory. Nothing’s wrong there.”

Harry stares. “What?”

“Terrible business, isn’t it? Having magic around muggles. No harm in being powerful though, eh? Well, that is --” he trails off, then: “but nothing you can do about accidental magic. Far easier to just wipe their memories. We’re not angry with you for that, my boy, not at all.”

Harry is saved from formulating a response when Tom returns with a mug of liquid amber that smells of brown butter and crystallized sugar. The drink is placed in front of Harry with a wink and a “Mr. Potter,” and then a glass full of something clear that *oozes* the scent of burning rubber is set down in front of Fudge with a far harsher and yet more deferential, “Minster.”

Minster Fudge nods absently and Harry says, “Thank you.” Tom the barman smiles at him and saunters away.

Harry takes a sip of the drink, savoring the sweet yet salty flavor on the back of his tongue. He realizes all of a sudden he’s barely eaten all day from avoiding Marge and then being sent out during dinner.

He ignores the staring minister and gulps the butterbeer down with all the grace of a starving man.

“Thirsty?” Fudge asks with disgust-laced humor.

Harry wipes the foam off his lip with the back of his hand. “Sorry,” he mutters, “just been a long day.”

Fudge softens imperceptibly and relaxes against the cushions at his back. “That’s to be expected. The Knight Bus takes a lot out of even grown wizards.”

Harry shudders at the memory. He almost responds with a question as to exactly *who* thought the Knight Bus would be an acceptable method of travel -- especially when he thinks most grown wizards are capable of appar-something which is instant -- but then considers the strangeness of this impromptu conversation with the magical world's most esteemed government official. So he asks, "Why am I here, sir? I mean, why are we getting dinner?"

Fudge bounces his knee again. "Well, my boy, I had to make sure you were safe, you see. We've decided to have you in a room here for the rest of the summer, mind, your muggle relatives are not -- the best fit -- in this particular climate. But no worries. Your safety is our priority."

Harry can't help the grin that blooms on his face. He tries to give a solemn nod -- very troubling times indeed -- but his green eyes are simply sparkling with the brilliance of a thousand miniature diamonds refracting golden sunlight. He looks positively mirthful. "I get to stay here until I go back to Hogwarts? That's what you're saying?"

Fudge pats the boy's hand. "Yes, you will be staying here." The minister then leans forward with an air of great mystery. "There is one more thing I'd like to ask you about."

They are so close now, Harry can smell the remnants of coffee and pepper-up on the man's breath.

Fudge glances this way and that, then whispers, "The Malfoy's piece you crafted, the winter wonderland, is magnificent. I thought Lucius was exaggerating but during his June gala I found myself awed. What could I do to commission a piece for myself and my family?"

Harry blinks. Then he blinks again. "Um," he says articulately, feeling rather a lot like Dudley. "Right. Yeah. An art piece." He thinks for a moment. "Well, there's a waiting list," Fudge motions go on like this is a perfectly reasonable thing to say even though Harry just made it up on the spot. So then Harry continues, "If you owl me with what you're looking for in general terms, I'll add you to the list."

Fudge pats his hand again. “I’ll be sure to do that. Thank you, young Harry. I look forward to seeing you again in the future.”

The Minister leans back and grants Harry his personal space. He straightens his maroon coat, stands, downs his glass in one long gulp, and then once again pulls Harry up by his elbow. He looks at one of the wizards in red robes.

“Shacklebolt. Could you take Harry to his room?”

The wizard, a tall and rather attractive dark-skinned man nods sharply. “Of course, minister.”

Fudge ruffles Harry’s hair like he would a dog. Paddy growls just slightly. “Well then,” The Minister says, “I’ll be off. Stay safe, Harry.”

Harry pets Paddy in a way he hopes is comforting. “You too, sir.”

With an air of immense self-satisfaction, Cornelius Fudge ambles away. Three red-robed Aurors follow behind in a loosely protective formation.

Shacklebolt seems rather quiet, and with hand-gestures leads Harry to his room. The man knocks on the door, opens it, and then says, “Wait here, I’ll do a safety check and set up some wards.”

Harry shrugs. “Alright then.”

The man enters the room quickly and closes the door. Harry sees

through the cracks flashes of electric blue and moonlight silver. The door opens, revealing a smiling Shackelbolt.

"All clear then, Harry. Be nice and secure for the rest of the summer. No more running off and we'll all be right as rain."

Harry looks into the empty room with a simple bed and a single window. It's perfect.

"Yeah, I won't do that -- again -- I mean. Thank you."

Shacklebolt clasps his hand and pumps it in a very manly handshake. "You're welcome. Stay safe, alright?"

Harry tries to give a strong grip back. "You got it, sir."

Shacklebolt releases his hand. "Well alright then, see you around Mr. Potter."

"See you." Harry walks into the room, closes the door, and then sits on the blindingly white bed. He wonders if Hedwig will know to find him here or if she'll go back to the Dursleys. She always seems to know where her human is; he's not too worried.

Just in case she comes to find him, he goes and unlatches the window. It's stopped raining.

He slides down the wall and stares out at the unpersonalized space (like his room back on Privet) and feels the weight of the day. He's

alone now. No one is coming after him. He's just going to be here, in this room, all on his own. He doesn't have to go back to the Dursleys. It's all he's ever really wanted in a summer.

And yet… he's lonely. He wants someone to hold him, someone to *love* him. He has no one with him here, in the land of the living. (Abandoned.)

Tom. If no one else, he has Tom. And maybe… maybe today he can finish the drawing, make Tom someone here, in the world Above. (Then Harry wouldn't be alone.)

(Neither would Tom.)

He pulls out the diary and a pen and then, rubbing his fingers over the cover like it's an amulet. He flips to the page where Tom stands staring back at him, eyes blinking every now and again. The peacock nuzzles at the statue-like Tom in confusion, gets bored, and then leaves the page to go lie down somewhere else in the diary world. It looks almost like the peacock has lost weight.

No, Harry thinks, the peacock *does* look sick. And the grass, he sees on another page, is dying.

Furrowing his brow, he looks back at the almost finished Tom, and sets to work. Some things can wait, but this cannot. His hands move at a feverish pace once he begins. He feels a deep calm as his pen whispers across the page. His mind is clear, somewhere deep in his soul he hears a bubbling stream, and it's as though the ink itself pours into his heart and guides his hands.

The pen glides across the paper faster and faster as he places the finishing touches on Tom's portrait. His fingers drip midnight and he

feels a buzzing all around him, as though the image is trying to rise up and out of the book. He closes the diary with a sense of finality and then places one palm on its cover. It's warm, he thinks absently. He watches with mute horror and morbid fascination as obsidian ink rises up into his veins, wraps around his heart, and exits through his other palm.

It is silent save for his labored breaths. He is still alone.

With mounting horror, he flips open the diary and scours all the pages, noticing many things all at once. The wildflowers have wilted and rotted, the grass has turned brown, the peacock is a corpse on one page and the weeping willow has fallen on its side and is nothing more than a desiccated trunk. He turns the pages looking and looking for any sign of vibrancy, but all he sees is that everywhere life blossomed now holds only the burden of death.

"No." He murmurs, "No, no no!" He's crying and barely breathing around the strength of his sobs but he can't seem to stop, doesn't know if he will *ever* stop, because there's death, so much death, and…. Tom.

Tom is gone.

***

When Tom starts to feel the Pull, he almost waves it off as a strange emotion. He's been feeling so many of those recently.

But it tugs, and it aches, and he begins to realize that this is the moment when everything changes. He's going to end this self-imposed isolation and enter back into true reality.

It’s bittersweet, he reflects. Here, he has his artist’s creations all to himself. He exists only for Harry and when Harry dreams, Harry exists only for him.

Will he still get Harry’s nights, he wonders, when he returns to the world Above?

He’ll take them back, he supposes, if he loses them. With magic in his grasp, nothing is beyond him. (Even escaping death.)

He walks out of the ghost Hogwarts. Decorations can mask even the foulest of places, but he will not miss the prison of five decades. He stands out in the field and breathes in the feeling of vitality returning to his bones. He had not noticed how different it felt to be… alive.

He is breathing now. In, out, it hurts to hold it in. He hasn’t breathed; he's forgotten how it felt when air enters and the relief it brings.

The world around him is dying. Neige is lying on the ground and whimpering, the poor thing. No matter, he can find other peacocks, but he is worth everything.

But the angry, beautiful willow is falling. The boughs that rustle with anguished silence and the pained branches that shielded his Aegean eyes from the endless grey sky are splintering into nothingness.

He feels something, there. A sense of loss -- perhaps -- for that brilliant, lonely… powerful tree. It was like him, he thinks.

Its sacrifice will not go to waste.

As all the warmth bleeds out of Neige, Tom's boots crunch over decayed flowers and the bones of songbirds.

He walks to Harry's courtyard. He still remembers the taste of his artist's blood on the back of his tongue, feels the shaking body clasped tight in the cage of his arms.

He leans down and picks up the snapped yew sticks, leaving the full holly-wood wand on its own. That's not his.

But these two halves, they are broken, hurting… *his.*

He tucks them into his pocket as he feels his body Pulled away, leaving behind the masterpiece of tragedy and opening his eyes to the world Above.

*

The first thing he sees is that he is unmistakably in a room in the Leaky cauldron: white bedspread and open window.

The second thing he sees is that Harry is huddled against one wall, sobbing so hard the poor thing can barely breathe, rocking himself in a soothing motion.

There is a large black dog asleep underneath the bed, tail peeking out. The diary lies open and abandoned on the floor.

"…Harry," Tom murmurs.

The precious boy can't hear the word over the strength of his anguished cries.

Tom strides forward and kneels down, remembering their first meeting in a cupboard months ago.

He pulls the unresisting body forward and into his strong embrace. He nuzzles the soft hair, marveling that this is real, that he can feel the boy's warmth. That he himself has warmth.

"Harry," he says again, "You're alright. I'm here, sweetheart. I'm here."

The sobs hitch. "Tom?" His voice is broken. "Is that you? Tom? Is that you?" Harry pulls back and Tom lets him.

The small hands that are riddled with calluses trace all over his face, cupping his cheek and running over his nose.

"Are you real now?" Harry asks with red eyes and tear tracks clear as the lake water.

If Tom's eyes fill with their own imitation of tears, no one other than the miracle in his arms will ever know. He presses a kiss to the boy's temple and controls his breath.

"Yes, I am real. I'm here. I'm *here.* " His voice shakes with the conviction of his words. For a moment Harry stares at him in wonder and then his face crumples.

He burrows back into Tom's chest with a fresh wave of sobs, hands curling into the fabric of the older boy's robes. *I'll need to buy new clothing soon. I wonder if my elder self has acquired any funds or if I'll be obliged to draw on someone's money.*

Harry, heartbroken, cries, "They're all gone. I drew them into the world and now they're dead. There's *so much* death."

Tom rubs a comforting hand down the boy's bony spine. The sweet thing's lost too much weight.

"They walked so I could run. You are a marvel and so were they, but it's alright. I'm here, my darling. I won't leave you."

Harry's voice is so young all of a sudden and full of the anguished hope of someone who's been abandoned too many times. "Promise?"

Tom tightens his hold. "I promise." *And anyone who tries to take you away from me will learn what it means to be afraid. They will* ***burn*** .

Slowly, Harry's tears stop and the boy melts into Tom's frame.

"Come on sweetheart. Let's go to bed." Harry nods weakly and allows Tom to half carry him to the bed.

He uses the boy's wand to utter a quick Reparo and then gives a shark-like grin at the sight of his newly fixed yew wand, reborn from the ashes like the phoenix that grants it power.

He casts a cleaning charm on the sleepy boy and transfigures both their clothes to soft silk pajamas.

As he settles underneath the covers, wrapping around Harry to keep the boy safe and warm, his artist speaks voice soft with exhaustion.

“They were always going to die.”

Tom runs a finger through Harry’s hair with impossible gentleness, awed at how he feels tired and might actually sleep for the first time in five decades. “Hmm?”

Harry sighs contentedly. “I knew from the peacock.”

Tom laughs in remembrance of the dumb creature that followed him and tried to swim whenever he went to the lake. “Neige you mean?”

Harry gives a laugh too, a melancholy thing. “If that’s what you named her, then yes. She ate, did you see that? And she’d wander, and lose weight. And the grass would get brown and the flowers I drew as buds bloomed.”

Harry runs a hand over Tom’s arms, as though making sure the Slytherin is real. “Professor Badgerwood teaches that whenever you draw something with magic, it’s a snapshot. A portrait is just a single moment of someone’s soul. They don’t eat, don’t need to sleep though they can, just like the person was for the moment they were painted. They can learn, but their ideas on the world won’t change no matter how much new information they hold. Because true magic paintings don’t change, if they do it’s dark soul magic.”

Tom bites his tongue. *Dark soul magic…*

Harry continues, nosing his face into Tom's neck. "But these drawings, they were so *alive.* And that means they were always going to die." Harry sniffles and his voice is so full of age-old knowledge. "Everything that lives dies. It's what it means to be alive… It's just that this was too soon. It was too soon."

Tom has a feeling that Harry's not talking about only the drawings anymore. He's thinking, maybe, of a red-haired woman and spectacle-wearing man brave as lions and dead as the peacock Tom named.

"It was, Harry." He pulls the covers up higher around them. "It was, but it'll get better. Sleep, sweetheart. I'll be here in the morning."

No one would draw them apart again. *Everything that lives must die. That's what it means to be alive.*

It is frightening, Tom thinks. But he feels warmth all around him, holds divinity in his bed. For the first time, he and Harry will greet the sunrise together.

He'll still be here when he wakes up.

For the first time in fifty years, he will *wake up.*

Chapter End Notes

It's ALIVE. Tom is alive! What does that mean for Harry? Where will Tom go to school? All will be revealed.

In the meantime leave a comment so I know that real people read this and drop a kudos if you feel so inclined.

Special thanks to everyone who writes back to me from beyond the void. Love you all!

Blood

Chapter Summary

Okay, okay. I know you folks wanted me to deal with Harry's things. I know I left them at the Dursley's for ONE chapter. I had a plan! So voila, feast your eyes on the retrieval of Harry's items. Also, quick reminder, Tom Riddle is still Tom Riddle. That's it! Love you guys XOXOXO

Chapter Notes

So first off, let me just scream in joy at how big this is becoming! *AAAA* what even is my life?

Secondly, for some eagle-eyed readers, I have a bit of an explanation for something that happened last chapter. yes, Tom fixed the yew wand with Harry's. Why did this work? Don't you need the elder wand?

The answer is yes, most of the time. Except Harry drew his inheritance as something broken that he desperately wants to be fixed. He drew a fractured world with the potential to be healed. So that's why Tom could fix the wand. It wasn't a normal broken wand.

Why did Harry know to draw broken yew? Well, that goes back to something in chapter five. I won't give that away yet. :) Also all this is just my own internal logic for the magical world that I'm making, but that won't be explained in the fic which is why I am giving it to you now.

PSA/ TRIGGER WARNING: There is a pretty intense moment of "Tom being Tom" that happens in this chapter. Tom will manipulate someone's mind (Not Harry.) If that is difficult for you to read, please be warned.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He’s woken by a sharp sliver of moonlight that pierces the darkness as it strikes through the open window. Years of living in Slytherin and the orphanage have made him a light sleeper (some would say an insomniac, really,) and he rouses immediately.

He blinks slowly, taking comfort in the fragile body wrapped in his arms.

The large black dog is watching him. It slobbers around yellowing fangs, beady eyes glinting with what looks far too intelligent anger for a mere beast.

It is crouched as though to jump. The grim is projecting the desire to spring, attack, *tear* out Tom's jugular and rip the teen to shreds. There's a familiarity to the anger the dog releases with every exhale. It's the same inferno of fury Tom felt unfurl against Harry's worthless muggle family.

If the rage had a flavor, it would taste protective. But the dog does not jump because Harry is wrapped so tightly around Tom that any attack on the older boy would invariably damage the younger.

The beast evidently cares for his artist. Tom is unsure of what to do with that information.

The hound seems more man than canine. This is evident in the calculating pose it holds and the complex equations of action evidently passing through its mind.

"So you're an animagus," he says softly, considering.

The dog flinches. *Got you.* It then drops out of its pose and lolls its tongue, making its eyes go comically wide. It seems to be adopting an image of innocence, "What a wizard? Not me! I'm just a cute and stupid little dog, aren't I?"

Tom is unimpressed. It only solidifies that the being before him is a wizard. Likely a grown wizard. A male adult wizard who has been following Harry under the guise of being a companion.

Tom's eyes narrow. What a dangerous thing to be following a thirteen-year-old boy around.

Without wasting another moment he lazily -- wandlessly -- casts an imperio at the… "dog." Immediately, it relaxes into a countenance of bliss.

Tom's first wandless spell was the imperio. He mastered it at fourteen. The trace would alert the ministry if any unforgivables were cast with an underage wand, so he'd been obliged to learn it without the crutch. He'd mastered the other two unforgivables within that very same month.

Tom had discovered the first year he became the "Lord," of Slytherin, that imperios were far more effective than crucios in keeping his knights in line. There's nothing more intoxicating than watching your lord take complete control over someone and their actions. It's a heady thing to witness, and the desire to be able to hold the same power is all-consuming. Each of his knights began to wish fervently that they too could one day control those around them like marionettes on strings. They would do anything for their lord to teach them.

There is also nothing more terrifying than awakening from a state of ignorant content with hands covered in blood, a bite-mark on your neck, and no recollection of how any of it happened. Those that disobeyed him were obliged to try to piece together the days -- sometimes weeks -- of their lives where they were little more than shells doing whatever it was Tom desired. Tom was their puppet master. That kind of fear *inspires*.

He smiles at the familiar feeling of power strumming in his veins. He has a noose wrapped around this man crouching like an animal before him. He could just as easily make the wizard drink a pepper-up potion as he could force him to slit his own throat.

He's missed this. He grasps a person's future in his hands and for the first time in fifty years, he feels *alive.*

Tom smiles down at the sleeping Harry and presses a kiss to the boy's temple. Gently, he extricates himself from the younger boy's limbs and watches as his artist sighs and snuggles more deeply into the soft mattress. Wrapping the covers around his treasure, Tom softly slides out the bed. "See you in a bit, my darling."

He looks at the dog which is still complacent in its state of powerlessness. "Come." He commands. The animagus follows like an obedient little hound.

Tom slips out into the hallway and then leads the beast down the hall and to the stairwell. It's late and they are on the highest floor of the Leaky Cauldron. It is unlikely will come up to this spot. He wards the area around them so that is impenetrable to wandering eyes and soundproof.

He stares into the eyes of the beast and orders, "Change back for me."

The dog shifts and lengthens, matted fur giving way to clumps of stringy black hair, eyes turning grey, muzzle lengthening to reveal gaunt cheekbones. The man in front of him looks emaciated, tall, and is wearing only patchwork decayed cotton.

He smells better than he should given his appearance, but Tom

supposes Harry must have been giving the wizard some baths when he thought it was a dog.

Tom looks into the man's eyes, casting a quick legilimens, but he quickly pulls back.

It's chaos in the man's head. The landscape of recollection is fractured beyond all understanding.

He recognizes the aftereffects of exposure to dementors. So this man... must have escaped *Azkaban* . Looking at the ill-fitting rags and skeletal structure, the trauma buried in the man's flinty eyes, Tom decides it's the only explanation. *Honestly, Harry. Of all the people you could have following you, you end up with an escaped convict. What would you do without me?*

In time, the man will heal, but as of now, his motivations are unintelligible. He himself does not know why he's behaving the way that he is. He's balanced on the precipice of insanity.

Two things in the bedlam of this man's mindscape stand out to Tom.

The man is angry at a rat who is also a man… so unbelievably angry. And he has endless -- almost desperate -- love, all of it focused on Harry. It is not romantic adoration, but anguished affection for someone who is between a son and younger brother. The love for Harry makes this person useful.

Tom wishes fervently for some veritaserum but fortunately knows enough ancient runes to make do.

He looks at the man. "Cut yourself where you'll bleed enough for one

handful and collect the blood."

The gaunt figure transfigures a strip of cloth he tears off his tattered garment into a simple dagger and slices into his thigh, collecting the droplets in his cupped palm and dropping the dagger near his ankle.

He holds out the crimson liquid to Tom as an offering. The Slytherin grins widely.

"No need for me to touch that. Use it to draw the images I will put in your mind."

Slowly, following the guideline Tom forces into his scattered memory, the black-haired creature bends down and draws out the runes for a truth circle in scarlet. It surrounds him in a manner that makes it look like he is a summoned devil.

When the circle is complete, Tom casts an incarcerous, tying the man up so that he suspends from the ceiling and just his toes brush the runes.

He lets the imperio go and immediately the man is snarling and yelling and demanding Tom get away from " *Harry, you motherfucking creep. He's too young for you to be calling him sweetheart. How dare you take advantage --"*

Tom rolls his eyes and cuts the man off. "What is your full name?"

"Sirius Orion Black." The man's eyes narrow. "What did you do to me? I didn't want to answer that question."

Tom sits against the wall of the stairway, looking at the odd picture of a man hanging by his wrists and surrounded by a circle of blood. “You’re in a truth circle. Surely a son of House Black would know that, especially Orion’s son. Tell me, was your father forced into marriage with that hag Walburga? We were all wondering if he’d be able to get Druella Rosier instead, but Pollux seemed quite intent on keeping Black blood pure as can be.”

Sirius seems to be fighting the compulsion, but he eventually opens his mouth. “Yes. They were married and hated each other. And their children.”

Tom raises a brow. “Children? Good for Orion. Where are your siblings now?”

“Dead.” Sirius spits. “Both my little brother and James.”

“James? Who is James?”

“James Potter. He was murdered by he-who-must-not-be-fucking-named. Peter betrayed him.”

Tom sits absorbing that information. “And then you were framed for their betrayal?”

Sirius glowers. “The rat ran away and blew up a dozen muggles. They found me on the street and threw me in Azkaban. At first I thought staying in Azkaban was what I deserved. It was my atonement because I should have known better than to let Peter be the secret-keeper. I as good killed them myself. But then I saw the rat on vacation sitting on the shoulder of the youngest Weasley boy.”

“Ron Weasley?” Tom asks sharply.

“That’s the one. Looks just like Gideon did when he was younger.”

Tom clenches his jaw. The man who betrayed his artists’ parents has been sleeping in Harry’s room for two years. The rat has been fed from Harry’s *hands* .

It will **die** .

“So you escaped to hunt the rat down?”

“Yes. And to see Harry. I needed to know he was okay. I’m his godfather.”

His godfather. That means if he’s cleared for his crimes, he can take Harry’s guardianship away from those vermin. And he’s such an easy thing to control. Remove his anger and all he’ll have left is love for my darling. He’s the perfect puppet.

“Alright.” Tom says, standing up.

“Alright, what?” Sirius asks warily.

“We’re going to change your mindset and memories. Here’s your new reality: you don’t care about your revenge any longer. All you want is to protect Harry. And you remember me as Harry’s best friend from

Privet drive. You watched me and were shocked to see that cousin Cassiopeia is my mother. You don't know who my father is. But she killed herself the day before Harry blew up the hideous Marge for reasons you and I both don't understand. You feel protective of me because I'm your family and I remind you of your little brother. When you saw Harry running away, you got me to come with him as well because our love for each other is clear and without him, I'm all alone."

Black shakes his head. "But you're not related to me, and I didn't see any of that."

Tom advances on the man, picking up the discarded transfigured dagger and twirling it between his hands. "There is more than one way to change someone's memory. The most famous is the oblivate, of course, but it can be overcome. And it only erases memory. It has no capacity for augmentation."

Black eyes the dagger. "What are you doing?"

Tom stands eye to eye with Sirius, using the dragger to lightly stroke the man's cheek. "English wizards, especially purebloods like you, are so pompous as to rely solely on Western magic and ignore all other magic incantations, except for Avada Kedavra. There are so many powerful spells from Arabia that English wizards never bother to learn. It's a waste."

He takes the knife to Sirius's forehead. With slow, deliberate cuts, Tom carves the memory rune, blood beginning to well up and drip down Black's face. It smells like copper. He'd forgotten.

Sirius shut his eyes against the pain. "So you'll just torture me then?"

Tom laughs. “Not at all. I thought you would recognize the blood ritual for a permanent enchantment. I’ll even tell you what the spell means before I use it on you: ‘as I speak, so will you remember.’”

Black tries to move from the knife but the rune is complete. There’s nowhere to go. He’s already bound and bleeding on Tom’s altar. His eyes are wide with fear. He looks like a cornered rabbit. “That’s impossible,” he whispers.

Tom raises his wand, lips stretched around blindingly white teeth. “We’ll see. *Kama 'Atakalam Hkdha Tatadhakar.* ”

The stairwell is bathed in blinding red light and the lingering scent of pennies.

***

Harry comes back to consciousness slowly. His bed is so soft… softer than the lumpy mattress with springs that always poke and prod him during the night back at Privet Drive. It feels like the bed back in Gryffindor tower, warm, safe and it smells like home.

Sometimes Harry thinks that magic has a smell. Places infused with spells take on this quality of a pinewood and roast chestnut perfume. He asked Hermione once if she could smell magic too -- if it smelled to her like the dusting of fresh leaves fallen on the forest floor and the remnants of a campfire still emitting wisps of crisp smoke. She’d pursed her lips, looked at him, and then said, “I read once that people who can smell magic can learn to see it.”

It was the only answer she gave. (It scared him. It scared him even more when Professor Trelawney told him in her sherry soaked linens and garish jewelry draped neck that he had ‘soul sight.’)

He associates magic with being home in Hogwarts so he feels his heart beating erratically for a moment when he opens his eyes to a clinically clean white room with an open window.

“Harry?” Comes a voice laden with sleep. Harry flinches and looks to his right. He realizes that someone has one arm over his chest and that the other cradling his head.

“...Tom?”

Tom sits up slowly, still holding Harry’s head gently and then moving it into his lap. “In the flesh.”

Harry thinks over the past day and night. “That was real? You’re really here?”

Tom runs a finger through the younger boy's hair. “I’m really here,” he affirms, “and I’m here to stay.”

Paddy jumps on the bed and licks Tom’s cheek before settling down to stare almost lovingly into Harry’s eyes.

“Hey boy. Sleep well?”

The dog seems to nod.

“Paddy’s a smart dog, isn’t he?” Tom remarks in an affectionate tone.

Harry can't help the grin that blossoms impossibly wide. "The best."

Paddy wiggles his tail as though agreeing, "yes, yes, of course, I am the best."

Harry looks out to the open window. "Did Hedwig come in? Has she found me yet?"

Tom stretches his hands out to the sky and yawns. "She's probably waiting for you at Gringotts. Owls will do that."

Harry sits up too and rubs a hand over his face trying to take deep breaths and feel calm about the missing owl. (His first real friend.) "Why would she wait for me there?"

"Because you're going there today, aren't you? Owls are smart like that. Your Hedwig maybe more so than most. Trust me, sweetheart, she's waiting for you and perfectly fine."

Harry nods weakly. "Right."

Tom takes the younger boy's hand and tugs him off the bed. "Come on, let's get ready to go. The goblins await."

Harry sniffs. "The goblins wait for no man. They just tolerate us."

Tom laughs, the notes echoing in the sterile room and making it

impossibly warmer. “You’d think most wizards would figure that out at some point, but I fear many never do.”

Paddy seems to also find goblins amusing and weaves between Harry and Tom’s legs as they dress. Harry turns his back to Tom for privacy as he changes out of his pajamas and into the same black trousers and soft blue sweater he wore on his run from his relatives.

When he turns around, Tom is dressed in a high necked open cream-colored robe that comes down to about mid-thigh and simple black underclothes.

Harry raises a brow and pinches the lapel of the robe. “And where’d you get this?”

Tom smirks. “I am an incredibly gifted wizard. Transfiguration is no exception to my exceptional talent.”

Harry looks at the craftsmanship and can see all the little details that could be improved, be given greater depth. With his wand, he carefully tweaks the design until the collar is inlaid with crystalline embroidered snakes that writhe and slither slowly over the embellishments.

Harry knocks his shoulder into Tom’s. “I’m told that I’m a natural at transfiguration as well, Mr. prodigy.”

Tom observes the minute changes and the slow-moving serpentine detail. “Indeed you are.”

The two make their way to the bottom of the leaky cauldron hands

wrapped around each other's waists, Paddy trotting behind them happily.

They grab a quick breakfast (hot buns!) and then make their way into Diagon Alley. They pass by shop after shop, buying school things along the way, Harry flattening his hair over his scar and unconsciously huddling closer to Tom.

Tom meanwhile is attracting a fair amount of attention. With his stylish robes, tall height -- his sharp jawline and stormy eyes -- girls seem to be swooning at the mere sight of him and keep craning their heads to look at him twice or even three times as he passes by.

Tom looks around the alley in wonder. "It's hardly changed at all but it seems happier now."

"Hmm? What does?"

Tom motions to the alley. "Diagon. It was the war fifty years ago. Grindelwald."

Harry frowns. "Who was Grindelwald?"

Tom stops abruptly and tugs Harry's arm back so the boy doesn't keep going. "Who was Grindelwald? Did you just ask that?"

Harry nods slowly. "Yeah. Binns only ever teaches the goblin wars." Harry thinks about all he's learned. Grindelwald sounds familiar. He clutches onto the familiarity, beginning to taste smooth chocolate on the back of his tongue and the sensation of something jumping in his mouth…

“Oh! I remember now. It was on the chocolate frog card. ‘Dumbledore is known for his defeat of the dark lord Grindelwald’ or something like that, at any rate. Right?”

Tom shakes his head in disbelief and they continue their stroll to the bank. “Dumbledore finally proved his Gryffindor spirit,” it’s said mockingly, “and went and did it, huh? The self-reported greatest Dark Lord reduced to nothing more than a footnote on children’s candy. It’s a fitting end.”

Harry shrugs. “I guess.”

“What do they call the one who gave you that scar?”

Harry bites his lip. *You mean, what do they call who you became?* The question makes him feel a little twinge of something like betrayal in his heart. “They’re too scared to say his name. They just call him He-Who-Must-Not-Be-Named, or You-Know-Who.”

Tom seems to enjoy that immensely. With amusement he notes, “so they’re still frightened of someone who disappeared more than a decade ago, are they?”

Unable to keep the hurt out of his voice, Harry all but spits, “Well Voldemort destroyed an entire generation. He *murdered* my parents.”

Tom sighs. “He did. But that hasn’t stopped you from speaking his name. You’re stronger than the rest of them, aren’t you darling?

Harry digs his nails into his palm. “No. I just think that if I’m afraid of his name and afraid of him, then I’m afraid twice. Fear of a name increases fear of the thing itself.”

They’ve made it to the entrance of the bank. Tom opens the door for Harry. Voice taking on a belittling tone, he says “You sound like Dumbledore, darling.”

Harry mutters, “There’s nothing wrong with learning good lessons. It’s how we grow.”

Tom seems about to say something, but as soon as one goblin spots Harry, a male in a blue robe, it shouts, “Master Potter!”

Immediately all the goblins snap their focus to Harry, toothy grins materializing on all their faces. “Oh, master Potter has arrived. We have your owl, come, come,” one says dressed in a dapper red satin suit and too much jewelry, and Harry feels himself being guided underneath the cavernous ceiling to a backroom by no less than four goblins. Tom comes behind the odd procession.

One goblin whispers, “Do you want *those* to come with you?” It looks pointedly at Tom and Paddy.

Harry looks at them too, Tom with self-assured confidence and Paddy with a suspicious gaze at all of the goblins. “Yes, they’re both with me.”

The goblin salutes and then shouts off some things in guttural gobbledegook. Immediately the goblins rearrange their little marching square to include the older teen and dog.

The red satin-suited goblin says as they walk, “We are so glad you have come to talk with us. We have many plans for our investment in your business. We also have all your gifts in your vault from your dear owl, and a gift to present to you from the Malfoy family.”

Harry starts. Draco was better toward the end of the year, but they were far from friends. He’s pretty sure Lucius wants to murder him as a baseline emotion. “The Malfoy family?” He repeats anxiously.

The goblin cocks his head. “Surely you cannot think that after the painting you bequeathed to their family they would refuse you further endowments?”

Harry considers. “They already paid me.”

All the goblins seem to perk up. “Oh, how much?”

“800 galleons. I’d originally requested ten, but Draco insisted on paying more.”

This seems to be a highly controversial thing to say. They all begin yelling at one another in rapid-paced Gobbledegook, seamlessly shepherding Harry, Tom, and Paddy into an opulent office with high ceilings, gem inlaid columns, and a leather couch.

One Goblin physically drags Harry to the sofa and pushes him down. Tom follows them and gracefully sinks onto the cushions draping an arm over Harry’s shoulders.

The red-satin-suited goblin makes a motion with his fingers that resembles a star only it has seven points. All the others fall silent.

“Well, then it is no wonder they sent you something so valuable as a gift. You were underpaid Mr. Potter, by a significant margin.”

“But it only cost me five galleons to make. I, well I told Draco, that he was paying me too much. He said that he was underpaying but the profit is huge and it was just --”

The goblin holds up a finger, an odd look in his eyes. “There is no *just* here, Master Potter. It is rare for us to see a wizard so… humble, but we had not realized that it is because you are also stupid.”

Affronted, Harry says, “I am not stupid.”

Tom is laughing. So is Paddy, or as much as a dog can laugh.

The goblin merely straightens the cuff of his suit. “No? Perhaps then it might be said that you have no sense of self-value. To a goblin, such a thing is stupid.”

All the goblins nod their head as though to doubt oneself is a cardinal offense and the pinnacle of foolishness. Harry feels his cheeks grow warm from a telltale blush. “I don’t have *no* sense of self-value. People just inflate how good I am at things because of my scar.”

The goblins let out a collective growl. One of them, a female draped in diamonds, comes forward to stand before Harry. Because he is sitting and she is short, they are at a precise eye level.

“Master Potter,” she says in a deep, grating voice, “if I may, I would

like to ask you a few questions."

Tom squeezes his shoulder encouragingly. "Alright, then. Go ahead."

"When was the last time you saw a painting like the one you made for the Malfoys? Other than your works of art, of course."

Harry shrugs. "I don't know."

Another goblin pipes up, "it is incredibly likely that you have not."

The female in front of him winks. It is a horrifying expression on a goblin. "Indeed. What you have done with your painting is innovation at its finest. For all that you wizards like to claim Leonardo DaVinci as one of your squibs, he had not an ounce of magic blood in his veins and his inventions were muggle as they come. Michelangelo was in fact a squib, but there was no enchantment in his sculpture. You, Harry, are part of a tradition that as far as we goblins can determine, is three wizards deep."

She moves backward slightly. "There's one cave painting in Indonesia near Ubud that has similarities to your work. A Japanese painter named Hiroko Nakano painted her own select masterpieces in the 12th century. These are the only two examples of magical paintings we could find that are not portraits and do not… loop."

Harry tries to absorb all of that information. "What does loop mean?"

The blue-robed goblin replies, "it means the image repeats after a certain point. There are plenty of paintings of a flower opening and closing, caught in a continuous cycle of rebirth. There are paintings of

consumption, of death and of life. They all repeat in their loops. But we observed your Malfoy winter, and the snow never glittered exactly the same, the rainbow patterns changed minutely second to second, and your peacocks act like portraits of peacocks, behaving like slow-moving -- yet artistic -- true animals. You have essentially drawn a soul-bound portrait of a fantasy. Such a thing, in truth, has never been done before. It may very well be new magic."

The red-suited goblin clears his throat. "Master Potter, you are also the savior of the light. To give any gift to the Malfoy family helps clear their reputation from the war. To have done so with the first-ever of your sold pieces, when you are creating an entirely new form of magic in a method that has never before been seen and will remain unrivaled until a new generation is taught, most likely, by your hands," the goblin spreads his arms expansively, "such a gift, you must realize, is *priceless* ."

Harry shakes his head in denial. "That can't be…"

"Stupid," a goblin mutters.

The woman goblin smiles. "We'd like to help you understand just how much you are worth. The goblin nation is very much interested in investing in you, Master Potter. Very much indeed."

"I'll need to… think about it? I mean, what would that mean?"

The goblin in the red suit's eyes softened. "We'll go over it all with you and then give you time to reach a decision. As we do that here, perhaps your companion might step out for a moment? We do not begrudge you your... dog. Give us time to speak together."

Tom's grip tightens on Harry. "I will not leave him."

The goblins look ready to commit murder.

Harry looks into his determined eyes. “Tom?” he asks quietly, projecting all the vulnerability he truly feels at this moment. He can tell he has the teen’s full attention. “Can you get my school things from Privet drive? I’m… scared to go back, after Marge.”

Tom pauses for a moment, his mind clearly working through all the possibilities. Then he smiles.

“Of course, darling.”

Harry flinches at the tone. “Don’t hurt them, please.” He says quickly.

Tom pauses again, longer this time. “I promise not to hurt them today.”

With that, he leans down to kiss Harry’s forehead and is led from the room. Paddy relaxes against Harry's knees. The blue-robed goblin glares at the dog with malevolence and suspicion.

“Now that he's gone,” the red-suited goblin leans forward, “are you aware of just who your young companion happens to be?”

His eyes are intense and worried. Harry relaxes back into the couch. With confidence he does not truly feel and sweaty palms, he says with a hint of condescension, “Are you aware of who he never became?”

The female goblin laughs. “Oh yes, the Goblin Nation has made the right choice in investing in you, Mr. Potter.”

The red-suited goblin hums. "We have much work to do with little time. Your owl will likely murder us if we do not let you see her rather soon, I fear. To begin, Master Potter," he grins, "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Ragnuk."

***

Tom looks around the neighborhood full of identical houses, each one competing with the next to be more *normal,* to blend deeper into the muted brown background.

Each lawn is perfectly manicured, the grass green but in a dull kind of a way, imitating life with the same kind of accuracy as the hue of a faded child’s marker.

It is an aggressively average house, Number Four. It’s the kind of house that Tom expects to be filled with people who are exceptional in no respects other than their ability to be unexceptional in all respects. And he can see, so easily, the desire of a little boy who does not fit in to fill up such an unassuming place with boundless beauty.

He wonders, for a moment, if he had been more like Harry if he would have done the same in the orphanage. If he might have taken the backside of his French homework and drawn images of sunshine and roses with the chewed down charcoal. He wonders if his fingers would have been perpetually ink-stained and his nose smudged with graphite as his room was decorated in creation. It would have been a different meeting then, he thinks, with Dumbledore.

But that boy… the boy who would have drawn on the walls of Wool’s,

the boy who would have looked at something so ugly and transformed it into a place enchantment, that boy was raised in *this* house, with his own monsters.

He does not knock on the door to the home as he enters. He walks in as though it is his right to be there, as though he is the one who owns the building.

The living room is sterile, clean: white couches with blue accents and a glass coffee table. Seated watching the television is the Aunt Petunia, a horse-looking woman, too tall and too thin.

She stares at him for a moment in mute horror. He revels in it.

“You! Your kind is not welcome here! OUT! I want you OUT!”

She has not moved from the couch but has taken a pillow and put in front of her like it’s some kind of shield capable of protection. He wants to disabuse her of the notion, but he promised Harry he would not hurt anyone in the house *today*. He has patience.

He instead dips into a graceful quarter bow that he makes intentionally mocking. “My apologies, ma’am.” He gives her a bashful smile, “I am here to collect Mr. Potter’s things. I was sent by the ministry.”

Petunia sniffs, clearly trying to cover over her fear with a facade of disdain. “Is that so? Your lot has a government?”

“That we do, ma’am.”

She swallows. “And why do you need Harry’s things?”

Tom tries to adopt an apologetic expression. “Well, we’ve reviewed Mr. Potter’s case after the… incident, and we determined that you are not adequate carers for him.”

Petunia turns off the television, the mindless chatter suddenly more apparent in its absence. “Can I see,” she shudders and grips the pillow tighter, “can I see your left forearm?”

The non-sequitur is of interest. Tom makes eye-contact with her as he shows off his smooth forearm, watching her sag with relief. He sees images of Harry in a cupboard, feels overwhelming fear and guilt, and then memories of her sister -- Harry’s mother -- showing Petunia “ *the dark mark, Tuney. You see anyone with this on their left forearm and you run, you hear me? You make it look like you don’t know me at all, like we hate each other if you can’t, and you run as fast as you can.”* He hears Petunia saying, mockingly, *“But isn’t magic supposed to be wonderful? It’s all just a bit of fun, isn’t it? Just all the things us normal folks never get to see.”* He sees Lily shake her head, *“It can **kill** you, with just two words. Just two. Promise me. Promise me that if you ever see someone with this you’ll do as I say. There’s a war on, Tuney. There’s no terrorists -- your news, it just doesn’t understand. There are people torturing others for sport.”* He feels an echo of grief, *“Then just come out of there, Lils. No one needs magic. I live just fine without it. Let go of that nonsense and come back to us, to me, where it’s safe. You don’t need to fight in the war.”* He can already tell that Harry’s mother would never abandon the world of magic. *“Just promise me, okay?”*

“Alright. I promise.”

Petunia stares at him for a long time, as though she can decide whether or not he is a threat through sight alone before she sets the pillow down beside her on the couch. In a quiet voice, she says, “The boy’s room is upstairs, first door on the right.”

Tom nods and scales the uniform steps, taking notice of how the carpet does little to mute his footfalls and focusing on the cupboard -- the cupboard he remembers from the diary -- under the stairs. His ascension is a steady drumbeat: *thump, thump, thump,* it would have taken little effort to wake his artist up, if his suspicions are correct, just by a relative walking this very same path.

He reaches the landing and looks at the door with peeling paint and too many locks decorating the outside. There's an odd sort of ringing in his ears when he eyes the catflap. How many scraps of food were pushed through that little opening, he wonders. His artist has endured so much and is still not hateful.

That's alright. Tom can be hateful for him.

He pushes open the door, sending a stray bit of magic up to cause all the locks to fall off, landing in a pile with a steady, *clunk, clunk, clunk, clunk.* The room is small, impersonal, filled with stay bits of dust and nothing remotely comforting.

The blanket on the bed is threadbare and brown. The bed itself is narrow and looks uncomfortable. There is no desk. The window is closed and grimy. Next to it rests wooden boards, as though it had been nailed closed.

Tom takes a deep breath. *Tomorrow. Deal with them tomorrow.*

As he's collecting Harry's meager possessions, his eyes sweep over the room as though trying to determine just how exactly such a tiny place could have possibly ever held a boy with whole worlds brought to life in his mind.

He has all the things packed into a neat trunk -- courtesy of the goblins -- when he hears blundering and crashing and suddenly the door is thrown open, revealing a blonde-haired boy with the bulk of a boxer and the pudge of the Pillsbury doughboy.

He is not attractive, nor is he hideous to observe. Dudley, Tom supposes with ill-concealed ire.

“Harry!” The boy shouts before blinking at Tom’s impassive form. “You’re not Harry.”

Tom gives the boy a judgemental once-over. “Astute observation.”

Dudley comes over and places himself between the trunk and Tom. “You can’t take those things. They belong to Harry. I know he looks small, but he’s not someone you can just push around.”

Tom has to give a kind of shallow respect to the idiot child. He has not thought to question *why* exactly a stranger has been given access to his home, or if he should be frightened that someone has, he is only concerned with protecting his cousin’s items… perhaps out of guilt and perhaps out of genuine affection and care.

Regretfully, it seems as though this relative has already done his penance.

“I’m not here to steal anything. Harry won’t be returning and I am merely collecting his personal items.”

Dudley thinks it over. “He has more in the cabinet under the stairs.”

Tom nods. “Thank you.”

Dudley hesitates for a moment, then: “But he’ll be back next summer?”

Tom shakes his head. “He will not.” Sirius Black on a leash and the death of a rat will make sure of that.

Dudley seems to dislike the answer. His face screws up. “But he -- he -- he’s always been with me.”

“He does not belong to you.”

“No, no --” Dudley wipes his eyes angrily, “he -- he’ll be okay? Can he write me?”

Tom rolls his eyes internally. “If he so chooses.”

“What if -- what if I want to write him? How can I do that?”

Tom looks at the boy. He remembers how elated Harry felt when he was told, “I guess I didn’t need two bedrooms.” For better or for worse, this child is someone that can bring his artist joy. And that is something worth allowing.

“If you go to any post office and find P.O. box number 126, the mail will be carried to the magical world. You’ll receive your reply by owl.”

Tom leaves the room, pretending not to notice Dudley standing by the dirt-streaked window, staring out at the street and muttering, “126, 126, you can’t forget, can’t forget.”

As he climbs down the stairs and unlatches the cupboard, he feels his breath catch in his throat. It looks exactly like the one he remembers from the diary, except without the fire it is hateful and cold and dark. It smells faintly of lemon and bleach. Unacceptable. He pulls out Harry’s school things and adds them to the trunk.

Petunia comes to stand behind him as he finishes up. “It’s for the best that the boy is going to live with his own people. There’s no place for us there,” this sounds bitter, “just like there’s no place for him here.”

Tom finishes packing up the items and nabs a bit of hair from Petunia’s and Vernon’s coats, taking care to make sure the woman doesn’t notice.

He straightens and stares her in her pale, faded blue-grey eyes. “Is that so?” He asks evenly.

She huffs. “It is. It very much is.” She looks at Tom for a moment, as though trying to see what is wrong with him that he, a very attractive young man, might be a wizard. “Why--” she bites the inside of her cheek, “why is it that if it were so easy for him to be raised somewhere else, well, why was he placed here with us?”

Tom glares at the woman and for a moment allows a bit of his magic to rise up, hot and angry. “For the same reason you would have always had a place in the magical world. You were supposed to have

been his *family*. ”

Tom leaves Petunia standing in her sterile kitchen, blindingly boring white counters far as the eye can see. There is no wonder here, no promise of creation. There are only tomorrows that will go exactly like today, monotony extending into the future and left behind in the past.

She was right. Harry has no place here.

Chapter End Notes

Ta da! Next chapter Tom goes to Hogwarts... what house do y'all think he'll be in? Any guesses on what the Malfoys gave Harry? Also, I apologize about this chapter. My beta is MIA, my roommate has gone insane, and I've been busy. Thanks for your patience and hopefully I'll have a new chapter out by Thanksgiving.

Tired of waiting for updates? Check out my newly completed first-ever fanfic Another Mind Game -- It's the perfect mix of crack and angst and will make you laugh and make you cry.

Love Master of Death fanfics? Check out my other work: Harry Potter and The Immortal’s Playground

Drop a kudos if you feel so inclined and leave a comment so I know I am not writing into the void.

Decades

Chapter Notes

> Hahaha folks! So this one was longer than expected tee-hee. It just kinda kept going so hope y'all enjoy.
>
> Thanks to everyone who's still reading this. Y'all are the best
>
> Tired of waiting for updates? Check out my newly completed first-ever fanfic Another Mind Game -- It's the perfect mix of crack and angst and will make you laugh and make you cry.
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See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry's neck feels heavy as he stares out the window and watches muggle London speeding by. There's a collection of multicolored gemstones draped across his collarbones and making a home for themselves in the hollow of his throat. Each gemstone glitters with the colors of firelight, incandescent gold and warm yellow tones that blend into blinding white.

He's hiding them beneath a simple jumper, but he can feel them, and from the way Tom is looking at him, Tom can feel them too.

He still remembers the Goblins presenting him with the strangely ornate box carved from legitimate black marble and inlaid with the Malfoy crest.

("For you, Master Potter, from the Malfoy family," a Goblin had said, presenting the gift. "Worry not over curses, we've checked thoroughly because you are now an asset to our nation."

He'd looked at the stones in confusion and then at the female goblin

in alarm when she'd simply placed them on his collarbones and watched with satisfaction as they'd melded to his skin.

"What are they?" He'd asked, heart jackhammering away.

"Wizardkind calls them Mind Guardians. They are very valuable. They protect your mind from any attacks, legilimency, confundus, and even obliviate. They also help increase the ability to defend oneself from the imperius. They do not; however, serve as a perfect replacement for true mastery of occlumency. They can only be overcome by amortal beings, such as boggarts and dementors, or through soul magic. Even so, Mind Guardians will protect against nearly any human threat and are therefore highly valuable. They are rare, Master Potter, and cannot be removed unless *you willingly* perform a specific series of incantations."

Harry's mind had been spinning with the sheer amount of information, but the stones were starting to purr against his chest which he found alarming, and he wanted -- if only for a moment -- to take them off. So he inquired, "What are the incantations?"

The red-suited goblin had smiled like a shark. "Oh no, Master Potter, you'll have to learn that on your own. We'd be very stupid indeed to let something as valuable as your mind go unprotected.)

He still isn't sure how he feels about the stones. He didn't know it was possible to force a gift on someone, and he does resent his limited free will in choosing whether or not to wear them. But they're warm, and they hum to him sometimes, and he's sleeping so much better with them coiled around his heartbeat.

He slips his hand into Tom's as they step out of the cab, (Tom's somehow ended up with muggle money, Harry doesn't want to think about it too hard,) and walk into King's cross, luggage shrunken and

in their pockets, Paddy trotting behind them with more than even his usual effervescence.

Tom stares at the cars and the shops and the way people dress with ill-concealed confused wonder. “It’s the same around the edges, but the filling is so very different.”

Harry walks beside him as they make their way to the platform. “What is?”

“King’s Cross, to begin with, but also the 1990s. It’s been five decades since I’ve last been in this world and so much of it has changed. I’ll need to buy history books, I suppose, to get caught up. And muggle science journals.”

He looks at the station, and his expression morphs from astonishment into something clearly disturbed. When he speaks, his voice is hard. “Last time I was on this side of the barrier, children were sleeping underneath newspapers because their homes had been burned to the ground by bombs... How easily the world forgets.”

Harry shakes his head. “I don’t think the world forgets so easily, not all of it. Sometimes the only thing you can do is move on. There’s victory in remembering how to live again.”

Tom presses his lips together and then smoothes over his expression of doubt into something considering. He does that a lot -- buries what he’s feeling beneath a less challenging thought. “The wizarding world seems to have changed less, at any rate.”

Tom still looks all around trying to absorb everything novel. Harry pretends not to notice as Tom quickly averts his eyes from a woman wearing a mini-skirt, but he can’t quite cover his laugh. Tom flicks his

nose and grumbles, “It’s inappropriate, don’t laugh at my being a gentleman.”

Harry can’t help it.

They walk through the barrier to the Hogwarts express, hands still entwined, Paddy scampering all over the platform like a child who’s eaten too much sugar.

It’s quite early, just a few anxious parents milling about, and they’re all too caught up in themselves to notice the entrance of the one, the only, *Harry Potter*.

He’s absurdly grateful for the lack of fanfare. Tom leads him onto the train and selects a cabin seemingly at random because nearly all of them are empty. Padfoot settles onto the cushions like he’s a real person and entitled to more space than both Tom and Harry combined. He gets ear-scratches for the effort.

Tom reaches into his pocket and pulls out a pair of… glasses. They are square frames, the metal dark and rich and disappearing around the edges of lenses. He slides them on and all at once Harry is drawn to Tom’s eyes, their color somewhere between a crashing wave on the sea and the hue of a cloud right before it lets loose a storm. The change in his appearance with the glasses is subtle, he looks a little softer but his jaw seems sharper, he seems every inch the scholarly (innocently and obliviously attractive) student.

“Why are you wearing those? You don’t need them, do you?”

Tom smiles at Harry and takes the younger boy’s spectacles off his face, setting down the circle lenses down on the seat by Paddy. Harry’s vision goes blurry and he blinks furiously as he feels himself

pulled into Tom's lap, strong arms caging him against a broad chest.

"Not like you do, no. Sometimes little changes are enough to make people see someone new. Your glasses remind people of your father because he wore lenses just the same as you. My...other...self, the one I will never become, he prided himself on his perfect vision. He'd never deign to wear something that would showcase a disadvantage in battle. If I am to present myself as someone new without alerting anyone skilled enough to recognize a glamor of my altered appearance, I need to resort to… muggle methods."

Harry scoffs. "Glasses don't make that much of a difference."

He feels Tom nod from where the teen's chin rested on the top of his head. "That's true. It's not about seeming like someone else entirely, just enough to be believable."

Harry sighs. "I don't think it will work, but at any rate, can I have *my* glasses back."

He feels Tom's hand sliding down his arm and then entwining their left hands together. "No. Relying on glasses is dangerous. What if someone takes them from you during a duel and leaves you half blind? They could merely summon your spectacles and then render you practically defenseless. It worries me."

"So you're just going to leave me without my sight and then hope I'll somehow build up a tolerance to blurry shapes? I don't think you can train someone into seeing better."

He senses Tom laughing all around him, the rumbles in the older teen's chest contracting against Harry's back. "No, of course not. I raised my concerns to the goblins, and they provided me with some

enchanted contact lenses. They are self-cleaning, and will automatically adjust to your prescription. And, they are resistant to summoning. Let me give them to you?"

Harry says, "I want my glasses. I'm *fine* with them."

Tom clutches Harry tighter. "Darling, I couldn't live with myself if something happened to you because I'd let you be unprepared. For me, sweetheart?"

Paddy yips something that seems to be agreement. Harry sighs deeply, mutters "traitor," and then more audibly, "I'll try them, but if I don't like them, I'm going back to my glasses."

Tom relaxes. "That's all I ask, treasure." Tom's hand finds its way to the side of Harry's face and holds one eye open as he murmurs an inaudible spell with his deep voice. There's something strangely intimate about the way he's being held, Tom's hands cupping his face and around his face's most vulnerable feature. There's trust here, Harry realizes. He trusts this boy he met barely seven months ago more than he trusts nearly everyone in his life.

He blinks one eye against the slight discomfort before it smooths out and by then Tom is working on the other eye. He blinks again, and the world suddenly comes into focus all around him.

He can see the sunlight streaming in through the window and bouncing off the metal door in a thousand different places, bouncing about the little room and making patterns of warmth all over the walls.

He notices tiny dust particles floating in the compartment, each little spec illuminated in the morning brightness, haloed in gold and painted into auriferous splendor.

He's never seen the world like this before. His glasses, he realizes, were never quite the right prescription. He didn't know light could have so many points of reflection outside of one of his paintings. The world is so much more beautiful than he's ever known.

He's beaming before he realizes what he's doing and turning himself around, hugging Tom fiercely. "Thank you. Thank you."

Tom kisses the top of his head. "Anything to keep you safe." There's a promise there, something dark underpinning the words. Harry pulls back, still getting used to Tom's face with glasses.

"But if these contacts exist, why would you wear glasses? It doesn't make sense."

Tom is clearly proud of Harry for having asked. "The contacts are *expensive,* darling. They're a new invention and there's a waiting list a mile long. You're incredibly lucky to have been given a set."

"How'd I end up with them then? Did I pay for them? Did you?"

Tom looks down at Harry indulgently. "I told you, darling. These come from the goblins. They want you to be the best artist you can be. You can hardly do that in dilapidated frames that do nothing to help you see the world in all its brilliance."

Harry's about to respond when the door opens violently and a man in a red robe and skin of smooth chocolate tumbles through into the compartment. Harry recognizes him as Shaklebolt, but he's a far cry from the calm man that had seen him to his room.

“You alright there, Mr. Potter?” The man’s eyes flick to Tom who’s holding Harry’s waist as he perches in the older boy’s lap.

Harry rolls inelegantly off of Tom and onto Paddy’s tail, and the dog waps him as though saying, “watch where you’re going.”

Harry straightens himself and wills his blush away. (It doesn’t work.)

“Oh yeah, I’m great, Mr. Shacklebolt. No worries.”

The auror narrows his eyes at Tom. “And who are you?”

Tom gives the man a charming smile and inclines his head. “Tom Black, a pleasure to meet you.”

The auror gets only more suspicious. “...Black, you say? I thought they were all dead or incarcerated.”

Tom exhales, slow and controlled, and looks quite dejected. “Yeah... yeah. My mom -- she, she, she died a few days ago. It’s just me now.”

Shacklebolt does not relax in the slightest. “I wasn’t aware the Blacks had another son. Who was your mother?”

“She told me her name was Cassie. I didn’t know my father.”

The auror’s expression remains hard as stone. “ Cassiopeia's been missing since 1964 when she was disowned for refusing a marriage.”

Tom looks somewhat angry. “Well, I guess she re-appeared in 1977 because she was with me, her *son* .” Tom clenches his jaw. “Look, do you have a reason for questioning us, or can you leave us in peace? If there’s a problem, we are entitled to attorneys.”

Shacklebolt examines Tom with frightening intensity before answering, “I’m here to protect Mr. Potter. I’m doing my job best as I can, Mr. *Black.* ” He focuses on Harry, “We were worried about you. We were supposed to escort you to King’s Cross today for your protection but you were already gone this morning when we came to collect you.”

There’s a question there, a subtle accusation, but Harry hasn’t done anything wrong. “We just left early to get here before the rush. It’s hard for me when there are lots of people because of, you know --” he pushes his hair off his forehead to show the scar, “I'm a bit famous. So we wanted to avoid the rush. Sorry for worrying you.’

Shacklebolt grudgingly accepts the answer and with one last long look at Tom, steps out into the hall. “Let us know if you need anything, Mr. Potter. Anything at all.” The door closes once more.

Harry sinks back against the cushions. “That was weird.”

Tom agrees with a hum. “They do tend to show how important you are to them in weird ways.”

Harry absentmindedly pets Paddy’s flank. “...I wish I wasn’t. Important to them, I mean.”

Tom ruffles his hair and gives him a wry look. “That was never written in your stars, you realize. Even if your forehead was clear of a lightning scar, those hands of yours would have always made you important.”

Harry looks down at his long fingers and small palms, calluses at the base of every digit, knuckles perpetually stained in multi-colored ink, and allows himself to feel for one moment as though these hands are what people care about -- as though instead of caring about what he represents, (the boy who lived when his parents died, the chosen one destined to vanquish the *Dark Lord,)* they admire the beauty he creates. He lets himself feel, for just this stolen sliver of infinity, that he's important for no other reason than being himself, Harry -- just Harry.

***

Tom allows the nostalgia of the familiar train wash over him in comforting waves. So many things have changed from when he last walked these same steps and yet the heavy feel of magic, comforting and alluring, remains the same.

The station is filling up with families as the departure of the Hogwarts Express creeps steadily closer. He sees many students -- so impossibly young and stupid -- filling in the empty seats. He hopes with all his being that no one comes and disturbs him and his artist, but he hears the door sliding open to crush all his dreams.

A girl with the bushiest hair he has ever seen slides into the compartment with a large and ugly red-orange cat in her arms.

"Harry! I've been searching all over the train for you, and I don't know I would have found you, but Crooks knew just where to go. You will not *believe* how worried I've been about you this summer, what with Black on the loose and your horrid relatives most likely not trying to help you at all."

The girl says it all in one breath as she stands by the seat across from Harry and the cat promptly sticks its tail straight up and goes to inspect the very Black the girl is concerned about. The cat sniffs the dog and for a moment Tom thinks he's going to have to intervene -- the cat's part kneazle and clearly too smart for its own good -- but then it relaxes against the dark fur of the animagus.

He realizes Hermione's still talking and is now struggling with putting her luggage up, "but this year I tried ever so hard on the charms summer homework, because even though Professor Flitwick said we didn't need to cover the four uses of Geminio and the theory behind doubling in general -- which by the way, Sir Rasynthem has an incredibly informative thesis about and I've bookmarked the relevant sections in my copy for you later -- but even though he didn't *say* we had to, he clearly implied it, didn't he? You know, by giving it to us as something that he might require but wasn't *explicitly* making an essential part of the assignment."

Harry smiles fondly and good-natured. Tom breathes out steadily. *She's like a sister to him.* "I don't know, 'Mione. Flitwick might've said that just to make sure you didn't push yourself too hard."

He can already tell she felt no such way. "Push myself too hard! What would that even mean? I've only got five years left to learn everything I can. If anything, I'm a slacker, Harry."

"That is a lie and you know it."

She's still trying to lug up her luggage so, with a discreet cough, Tom waves his wand and levitates the trolley up. She startles. "Oh, can we use our wands now? I thought we weren't allowed until the train was in motion."

Tom laughs a little. "There's a bend in every rule. There are too many magic users congregated in this area right now. It's pretty much fair

game by the time you're at King's Cross. The trace won't work in such a highly magical area."

Hermione has a serious expression on her face that he recognizes from his own moments of realization. He can tell she has equations behind her eyelashes and she's organizing the world in those brilliant tawny irises. *She's a worthy friend for Harry.*

The compartment opens again and a boy with red hair and freckles appears, *another Weasley -- too many of them and not nearly enough money* -- and Harry smiles at him like he's the fucking sun.

"Ron! How was your summer?"

The boy -- Ron, stupid name for a pureblood, Weasleys have no sense (Septimus, going after *Cedrella* Black of all people?) -- settles next to Hermione with a defeated countenance.

"It was dreadful. We went to Egypt but all I could hear was Percy trying to impersonate a walking Encyclopedia and failing terribly."

They all giggle and Tom allowed his lips to quirk up in a semblance of amusement.

Hermione is back to looking at him with intensity. She sticks out her hand.

"Hermione *Granger." She's stressing she's a muggle-born to see how I'll react.*

Tom gives her a winsome smile. “Tom Black. Pleased to meet you.” He takes her hand in a firm grip.

Ron just waves. “Ron.” Then he takes a bite out of something resembling a sandwich, swallows, and adds as an afterthought, “Weasley.” Then his eyes go wide.

“ *Black?”*

Tom nods solemnly. “My mum was Cassiopeia Black.”

Hermione grabs on to that information. “Was?”

Tom does his best to look uncomfortable. It’s not hard, Harry looks distressed. *Oh, he doesn’t like lying to his friends. Poor thing.*

“She’s dead.”

Ron looks sympathetic. “Rough luck, mate.”

Hermione still has that manic gleam in her expression. “A dead Black is your mum. How convenient that no one else can verify your identity. How do you know Harry?”

Tom is impressed with the interrogation. “We’re childhood friends.”

“He doesn’t talk about you, ever.”

Tom spreads his hands. “He doesn’t talk much about his life at home, I’ll bet. He’s not a big sharer.”

Harry swats Tom. “I share.”

Tom smoothes down Harry’s hair with an expression that can only be described as doting. “I will not squabble with you like we’re school-yard boys. I am content in simply knowing that I’m right.”

Ron snorts. Hermione watches the interaction. “Tell me a memory from Harry’s childhood that I wouldn’t know.”

Tom leans forward, affection evident in his features. “Did he ever tell you about his first accidental magic?”

Ron and Hermione shake their heads.

“He accidentally turned a teacher’s hair blue. It was beautiful -- like the sky. And hysterical. Harry freaked out, of course. Told me all about it.” He has a soft expression, remembering Harry telling him about it back in the days they shared dreams. He wishes for a moment that the pretty lies he’s weaving are actually the truth, that he’s really someone who’s been there for his treasure since before he understood magic. He wishes that he could have grown up with someone like Harry. He thinks he might have been a whole person then, not just this impartial soul clinging to life with both hands torn and bleeding.

Ron is laughing and Hermione relaxes. “Well then Tom, it’s good to meet you.”

Harry grumbles, “Oh sure, don’t trust me to take care of myself and

know who's good and who's bad, why don't you 'Mione."

Hermione shoots him a mock glare. "Don't be snappy because we care about you."

Tom decides that Hermione will be very useful for Harry. "You know," he says, "I could have used legilimency or something to come up with the memory."

Hermione is unperturbed and seems to have caught on that Harry has something underneath his jumper and is steadily inching toward him. She says unguardedly, "But you looked proud I'd thought to ask. Which means you want Harry to be safe and admire me for trying to keep him that way. If you were really forcing your way in here, you'd have been annoyed or just blank-expression-ed when I was questioning you. Certainly not proud and assured."

He is surprised at her astute observations. He recalls suddenly with vivid clarity watching the sunset over the lake and Harry lying his head in his lap, "Ron's great. And Hermione -- she's the brightest witch of our generation." *So she is.*

Hermione finally reaches Harry and pulls down on his jumper, revealing the fire-colored gemstones underneath. Ron shoots up.

"Those are -- *mind guardians* ! How on earth --" Ron then looks at Harry for the first time and Hermione does as well, both really *looking.*

At the same time, they exclaim, "What happened to your glasses?"

Harry blushes. "Right, so there are these magical contacts…"

Ron says, “Came out last month, I saw it in the paper. That doesn’t explain how you got a pair. I read they were only going to royalty for like the next ten years because they’re so hard to make.”

Harry coughs. “Well, um, the goblins might have invested in me?”

Hermione is frowning. “That’s dangerous. Goblins are ruthless and if they’re giving you gifts they could be forcing a debt. Show me the contract later. And they gave you mind guardians too? That doesn’t make sense. I read all about them because they’re so precious. There have only been 112 recorded in all of Britain. And 47 have been lost.”

Harry squirms. “The Malfoy family gave it to me for the painting as a gift.”

Ron gasps. “That means you’re under the Malfoy family protective magic.”

“What?”

“Every member of the sacred twenty-eight has at least one mind guardian heirloom, but the Weasley and Prewetts lost theirs, and so did the Gaunts, I think. Oh, and Ollivander lost their three back in 1612. It was a thing because people claimed the Yaxleys took them, and it started a blood war. But if you’re gifted mind guardians from any of the sacred twenty-eight, it’s a binding oath to protect children of choice and thought, not blood.”

Hermione is staring at the stones with rapt attention. “I can’t believe they gave you this as a gift.”

Harry, the adorable thing, just seems confused. Tom taps his fingers

against his thighs. “It’s an equal exchange if you think about it. Harry gave the Malfoys a priceless painting and indicated that he'd forgiven them for their part in the first war. I imagine such a public gift has managed to eradicate lingering doubt about their place as death-eaters. It follows they’d give Harry their own protection.”

Ron seems like his whole world’s been shaken to its roots. Hermione looks like she’s been given a very challenging puzzle and Tom is somehow hoarding all her corner pieces. Harry, the adorable thing, is clearly working through the politics he carelessly allows to entangle him.

Tom revells in the easy companionship and affection he can’t ever remember having been given before. The green of meadows and bright spots of wildflowers speed pass them in the window.

It must be getting cold outside, Tom thinks. Frost is creeping up the glass in tiny veins. *It’s too cold.* He sees his breath in front of him and already has his wand in his hand before he’s thought about it.

Ron and Hermione are shaking. Harry is… Harry is collapsing. He sees his artist shivering and then diving toward the floor. Sirius seems immobilized.

Tom grabs Harry before he can hit the ground and pulls the boy tight against his chest. Something is wrong here, the stench of dark magic is permeating the entire train. He feels an irrational thought -- that it feels like how dementor exposure is described -- but that’s crazy. There are no dementors outside of Azkaban and the ministry holding cells.

And yet, a bony finger wraps around the doorknob and Tom finds himself staring into the shrouded darkness of a monster that preys on happiness.

Harry screams, distressed and blood-curling. His skin feels like ice against Tom's fingers. The dementor is gliding closer to the small boy, heedless of the other occupants of the carriage.

"The kiss," Merriweather had said in year five of Defense, " *when administered removes the soul from the body. It is in many ways a parallel to the Avada Kedavra. There are those who say it should be classified as unforgivable for this reason. When a dementor is given an allowance to give its "kiss," it will glide forward and place the absence of its face against its target. There are no ways to bring back the life of someone once they've been kissed."*

The dementor has little effect on Tom -- he has too few memories of happiness to be of interest, and his Occlumency is too strong, but Harry, Harry sees the world only for its beauty. Every time he holds a paintbrush he reaches epiphanies and euphoria.

The dementor is getting perilously close and for a moment, Tom feels utterly useless. He's never been able to make a Patronus. He's as much a creature of the dark as this soulless being that devours vibrance to feel something, *anything,* at all.

But Tom will not allow this to be the end of his and Harry's story. Not when it's just beginning.

"Something merely happy is very rarely enough to produce a Patronus. Even the strongest memory of pure joy is fleeting -- you need something enduring to combat the creatures of midnight. Select a moment that exists surrounded in darkness and carried, carries you into the light. That's how all the accomplished wizards make theirs."

Tom had scoffed at Merriweather in that lesson that was both a few

months and fifty years ago, but now he considers it with single-minded attention. Time is running out.

He tunes out the shivering body in his arms, the fear that courses through his veins, and closes his eyes.

(He's tired and alone and bored, so very bored. But the book warms and there are no words, only droplets of ink and then there's a tree, an impossible tree, impossible and beautiful. It reaches into the sky. There's life again. There's a future, there's hope. There's someone beyond this nothing he's half-lived for half a century.)

"Expecto Patronum!" Silver mist springs forth from his wand. It's not corporeal, it's barely there, but it's strong enough that the dementor backs up and drifts away. The silver tendrils curl and wrap around Harry, as though adding to Tom's protection, as though this guardian of his soul recognizes Harry as the important treasure he is.

It's not good enough. Not nearly enough. Ron and Hermione come back to themselves but Harry is still trembling and half-conscious.

"Shh, my darling. Breathe for me. That's it, in and out. Slowly." But Harry isn't breathing, he's hyperventilating. His heart beats faintly like a hummingbird losing life. He needs help that Tom cannot give him. Frustration rolls hot and heavy beneath his skin, this itch that he isn't good enough, doesn't deserve to know Harry. Not if he's reduced to being an observer of the destruction of someone he cares for. *It's a weakness to have all this dependence on a person.* It doesn't matter. He's too far gone. He'll burn the world after he loses Harry, but until then, he'll enjoy watching flowers bloom and spring blossom.

He can't do that if Harry doesn't fucking breathe. *Get him to a healer.*

“W-w-why were there d-dementors?” Ron asks in abject horror. Hermione is shaking herself.

“I d-don’t know. But that was *wrong* .”

Tom pays them no attention and scoops an unresisting Harry into his arms. He’s so thin.

The train is coming to a stop and Tom is running past people craning their necks at the odd student who’ve they never seen before and the small body in his arms. Tom pays them no attention either. Sirius is walking behind them slowly, clearly terrified.

There’s a professor in tattered clothing right off the train when Tom steps down with Harry in his arms. A wolf Patronus is lying at the man’s feet. There’s a heavyset woman in healer’s robe the man is talking to, “..Were looking for Black, but I expect they’ll all need chocolate,”

And she’s saying, “Well I never, what were they thinking, dementors around children? It’s --”

But she breaks off when she sees Tom and Harry in his arms. Tom can’t quite muster words around his desperation but he manages, “Help us,” in painful speech.

Her eyes widen and she’s about to step forward and give Harry the aid he so desperately needs when Tom looks up and knows it is all over.

Hagrid stands on the docks of the lake holding a lantern as children start to come off the express. Dumbeldore only ever sees people as

pieces on the chessboard. A Tom who is completely devoted to Harry will be a different pawn from the daring bishop that would one day become a player. Glasses will be enough to convince someone like that of the difference between his past and present.

But Hagrid sees people less for their uses and more for their being. It's why he has an unnatural ability with beasts. And Hagrid was expelled because of Tom. That's not the kind of face you forget. Not when it is responsible for taking you away from someone you love. And no matter how abnormal it was for the oaf to care for an *acromantula,* it was still something (someone?) Hagrid loved.

The man reacts immediately, brandishing an umbrella and stepping forward threateningly. "Get Harry away from him now, Lupin! Call the headmaster! Children, get behind me."

Lupin steps forward, confused, as first-years obediently huddle behind the half-giant and older years look on with confusion. Then Sirius pads over to Tom, and immediately Lupin goes into a defensive pose.

"That's Sirius Black! Everyone get back on the train!" And then Lupin casts an animus revelio and the dog transforms into the gaunt-faced wanted criminal. Several people gasp and start crying.

Ron's pocket rips as Scabbers lengthens into a chubby man with a missing finger and dark mark. Lupin's eyes just about pop out of his socket as several people, (Ron included) scream.

Percy Weasley immediately sends up red sparks. Tom remembers from his days as a prefect that this is the spell to summon help during an emergency.

Tom does not care at all about the chaos unfolding all around him and tries (desperately) to warm Harry up as best he can. Time is running

out and he holds the boy out plaintively to the healer, who closes her eyes and then takes him and casts a diagnostic even as she twitches in fear at the two revealed men.

And then, in a swirl of overpowering magic, Dumbeldore materializes with a pop and grim expression.

He takes in the scene, Tom crouched by a comatose Harry, Sirius Black and Peter Pettigrew held at Lupin's wand point.

His expression is dark as he immobilizes both Animagi. He then summons his own Patronus, a brilliant phoenix, and says, "Cornelius. I've uncovered Black and a very much alive Pettigrew. Send aurors if you would be so kind. And remove the dementors from my school at once."

In no time at all, red-robed men and women materialize and take Pettigrew and Black into their holdings. Dumbeldore stares down the group and says, "Tell your minister I expect a re-trial, naturally, for the events of Godric's Hollow. Pettigrew's being alive seems to throw the whole thing into question."

The aurors look uncomfortable. Dumbeldore smiles at them all benevolently. "Don't worry yourselves, I'll write. Oh -- and one more thing -- I've put a tracking diagnostic spell on both men, so any 'accidental' deaths will result in public outcry. I'll put that in my letter as well."

The aurors seem to be at a loss for words and simply nod and apparate away.

Dumbledore's gaze falls to Tom. "And you, *young* sir, would do me a great service if you accompanied me to my office."

***

Dumbledore's office should be familiar to Tom after all the interrogations he faced as a student decades ago. But just as the man in front of him is unfamiliar -- red hair replaced by silver, blue eyes behind half-moon spectacles (Tom's not the only one to change his looks with glasses,) spirit more haunted and hidden by a far more jovial veneer -- the office is similarly discomforting to Tom.

When Dippet had this office, it had been orderly and muted, simple chairs and bookshelves, and a great desk. Nothing about it had been extraordinary. Dumbeldore has added a Pensieve and at least three-dozen strange instruments that whir and hum, and a *phoenix. A living phoenix.*

"Oh, this is Fawkes," Dumbeldore says calmly. The bird trills at Tom and then wraps its tail around his wrist and settles on the table with a sleepy sounding sigh.

Dumbeldore raises an eyebrow. "He likes you." It sounds almost like a question.

Tom coughs uncomfortably. "Is he a real, living phoenix?" he asks. He knows the answer, but it's a safe question.

"Ah, yes, he and I have gotten quite attached to one another. People like to say he's my familiar, but I always say it's very much the opposite."

Tom hesitantly scratches the bird's head and it seems to enjoy it.

“Right. That’s good. Um,” Tom adopts his most kind self as his character, “my mum, she said if she ever died, that I’d be safe here.”

Dumbledore's eyes sharpen. “Your mother?”

Tom swallows. “ Cassiopeia Black. I don’t know my dad. He, um, he was pretty dangerous, she said. She didn’t want me to go to Hogwarts because she didn’t want anyone to know she had me. She was kind of paranoid. But I know all about it because Harry would tell me all about it.”

“Harry, hmm. How do you know him?”

“I’ve known him since forever, really. I lived on Privet Drive because my mum said there were wards strong enough to protect us there.”

Dumbeldore leans back in his chair. Tom can tell he’s thinking over Cassiopeia and if there’s any chance she’d had a son with Riddle, (none, she was lesbian as they came, but might have been just crazy enough to make a child from a sample taken from Voldemort unknowingly if it would be important, she was always a strong seer,) and if he’s going to accept this farce of a story.

So Tom does something he swore to never do in front of Dumbledore. He lowers his occlumency shields and guilelessly, fearlessly, meets the man’s eyes. He projects all his sorrow of never having had a mother, the feelings he’d had for Cassiopeia when he was eleven and she was seventeen and the only person in the Slytherin house to care for him at all that year. He knows the feelings he has for her are closer to childish devotion than love, but he hopes it will be enough. He focuses on the loneliness he felt in the diary and can still remember with his bones, and then full force loses himself to the intensity of emotion he feels for Harry: awe, affection, concern, lo--, *adoration* .

All at once, Dumbledore's expression softens, and Tom is graced with one of the smiles he'd seen the transfiguration professor give his favored students. *So you've found my place on your chessboard.*

The man says, "Of course you will be welcome here. I hope you will one day call it home. Due to all the...excitement of the train-ride, the sorting ceremony has been a bit postponed. I have the hat here with me. You'll know all about the houses from Harry, I assume?"

"Oh, um yes."

"Don't worry, my boy, it's painless, I assure you. We'll get you sorted and then put you in sixth year, you are sixteen, is that right?"

"Yes, sir."

"And I imagine anyone home-tutored by Cassiopeia will be plenty accomplished. My condolences by the way."

Tom resists rolling his eyes. "Thank you, professor."

Dumbledore lays a hand on his shoulder. "You are not alone any longer, Mr. Black. You are welcome here."

The man swishes his wand and the hat flies over.

Tom puts it on himself. He immediately hears a voice in his ear.

“Ah, Mr. Riddle, or should I say Black? How very fun to sort you again. Missing a bit of soul, aren’t you? But plenty of heart, I see. More than you had back when you were eleven.”

“I imagine you’ll want to put me in Slytherin again, but I’d do well in Ravenclaw.”

“You certainly would. And you do love knowledge. It would help keep Dumbledore off your back too, wouldn’t it?”

“Yes, it would.”

“But you’re not a Ravenclaw at heart even if you are smart enough, I’m sorry to say.”

“So back to the snakes?”

“Oh, I didn’t say that, did I? The first time around there was nowhere else to put you. You were self-absorbed, power-hungry, and vicious. But you were and are also incredibly charismatic. You had plenty of bravery but you’d have led the lions to their deaths. At least in Slytherin, you had to appeal to your followers with their self-interest instead of only your own.”

“Fascinating.”

“It is, isn’t it? But you are not that boy any longer, I think. You care about someone now. You care for your artist more than you care for the whole world.”

“He makes whole worlds.”

“You would choose him over power.”

“There’s no point in power if you have no one to share it with.”

“You are so incredibly loyal, perhaps the most of anyone I’ve ever seen. From the moment Harry overtook the importance of everything else, there was only one house for you.”

“No, you can’t be serious, I’m not--”

“Oh, but you are, Mr. Riddle.”

“HUFFLEPUFF!”

Chapter End Notes

Congratulations to Punk_Sarcastic_Misanthropic_Writer and HuffLePuff for accurately predicting Tom's new house. Y'all saw through me 0.0

Good luck to the badgers, am I right?

So, Black and Pettigrew, huh? How's Fudge gonna spin this in his favor? Also, on the subject of Sirius, he will start acting more as a man and be the man from canon (with some twists, courtesy of your boy Tom,) so don't worry about him TOO much. He'll be FINE. For the immediate future, at any rate.

Stay tuned for some good old Snape and Draco in the next chapter. And another painting by Harry because the art's been missing for like three chapters. Leave a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void and that you're still reading. Also drop a kudos if you feel so inclined. I'm so close to 4,000 and I'll spontaneously combust if I reach that incredible and frankly unprecedented number.

Storm

Chapter Notes

> Heya folks. Sorry about the long delay on this chap -- I normally try to leave y'all hanging for no more than 14 days. But it's finals week RIGHT NOW so I've been highly busy.
>
> You folks can (and should) expect more regular updates starting after December 13th, I might update twice a week for a bit because it will be winter break and what else am I to do?
>
> I hope you all had fabulous Thanksgivings and are staying safe during this kinda scary spike.
>
> As always, thanks for reading my work and I continue to stand in awe of how big this is getting. XOXOXO
>
> Insider comment, I was going to call this chapter Riddle or Underworld for the longest time, but I really just wanted to call it badger. And then I chose none of those names.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom removes the hat with shaking hands. *Hufflepuff?* He cannot avoid the deeply unamused expression that spreads across his face even as the hat radiates victory at a job well done. Dumbledore is seated across from him, hands folded on the desk and smiling beatifically. His white wispy hair shines like the moon and his blue eyes twinkle in a thousand places -- each sparkle more brilliant than the next and adding up to the constellation of stars he holds in irises.

Tom's nose wrinkles in his distaste for the entire situation. Dumbledore laughs and then disguises it as a very poorly acted cough. "Surprised, Mr. Riddle?"

Tom keeps his expression blank, bordering on confused. He maintains the curious facade, although inside he cannot tell what Dumbledore meant by the name slip of Riddle. *Does he know who I am? Or is this… a hint? For me to find my "father?"* ***What's your game, old man?***

“Riddle?” Tom echoes in a vaguely, though still unhappy, questioning tone.

Dumbledore seems to shake himself. “I’m sorry, Mr. Black. You do just look so very much like….” *A hint, then,* “but that’s not really the point, is it? Are you surprised at your sorting?”

Tom nods. “Very much so. I’d always assumed, as a Black, I’d go to Slytherin or -- Ravenclaw. I asked for Ravenclaw.”

Dumbledore seems almost overjoyed at this revelation. “And that hat still placed you in Hufflepuff -- hmm -- that says a great deal about your character, a great deal indeed.”

He knows it's childish, but “You don’t suppose there could have been a mistake, do you? The hat is rather old. Perhaps it needs to have the enchantments refreshed.”

Dumbledore gives Tom a gentle smile. “You, my boy, are smart enough to know that is simply not the problem and that your sorting will not change. Hufflepuff is a wondrous house. Loyalty and hard-work are the backbones for nearly every country and triumph. I would hope you could take pride in yourself.”

Tom says, in a bid perhaps for sympathy, or perhaps because it is true, “My mother was a Slytherin.” He doesn’t know if Merope even went to Hogwarts, but if she had, it would have been her house. In fact, he remembers paragraphs his living self had poured into the diary after discovering his (our?) connection to the house of Gaunt -- after killing his (my?) father -- and he knows, “My whole family went to Slytherin, my mother and my uncle and I’m just... *Hufflepuff* .” The word is spoken with an almost palpable distaste.

Dumbledore leans forward, eyes soft. “You had a cousin, actually, who went to Gryffindor.”

Sirius Black, Tom’s mind supplies. The old professor is still speaking, “it was difficult for his familial relations, I’ll not lie to you, my boy. But he did make some true friends and they became a loving family to him. There’s no limit on who you are allowed to love.”

Tom remembers asking the mutt about his family, and the answer, how James was just as much his brother as his own flesh and blood. Dumbeldore is looking at Tom with genuine affection in this moment, and the look is so different from anything he remembers from the man during his time at Hogwarts.

Maybe the new kindness emanating from the professor is just because of Tom’s new house -- he never liked Slytherins much and favored Gryffindors and Hufflepuffs especially -- but maybe it’s because Tom has changed in some fundamental way and the man can tell.

And maybe… maybe it’s because Dumbeldore himself has changed. His robes are garish and comical, his office is a mess, he has a pile of candy in the focal point of his desk. Dumbledore from Tom’s time was a man with red hair and a superiority complex a mile-wide. That man would never have allowed himself to appear so *barmy* for lack of a better word. This wizard in front of him with twinkling eyes and deep smile lines cares not at all about appearing foolish. He endorses it, in fact.

Maybe we’ve both changed. So out of curiosity that runs so deep about what it would be to have an adult in his corner the way Dumbledore championed Ezekial Prewett and because he wants the advice, he asks in a quiet voice, “Professor, do you think it is possible for someone without any healthy models of love to be able to…” he loses his courage, *never been a Gryffindor,* and thinks maybe he doesn’t want the

answer. He regrets speaking already, but something about the warm room and the invitation in Dumbeldore's very aura just made him have a slip.

But Dumbledore does not let the thread go. Instead, he exhales once, thoughtful and kind. "That is a heavy question. Can those of us seeking love but not knowing what it looks like ever find it? The answer, Tom, is that love is not something you find because of searching. You will simply wake up one morning, think of someone and fill with warmth, and realize you love them. Love, my boy, is neither healthy nor unhealthy. There's no one way to get it right. You find out what it means to you as you go along and can only hope that any heartbreak will be worth the experience. And it is, Tom. It *is.* "

A large part of Tom wants to bite something back along the lines of, "thanks for the platitudes, you sniveling geezer." Instead, he says, as though on the edge of epiphany, "Someday, I'll just know --" and his mind is filled with images of black, bird-nest hair and eyes filled with the kind of green you find on leaves growing up, always up, in the thick of the forest.

Dumbeldore settles back in his chair. Voice confident, he repeats, "Someday you will." He's quiet for a time and then says, "The hat is meant to study the potential of children. Adults are far too complicated to sort. Age brings internal conflicts. With older students, it looks at priorities over innate qualities. You are only the second person in my experience over the age of 11 to be sorted by the hat."

"Who was the other one?"

"Her name was Missy Damier. She was a half-blood about twenty years ago. Her mother was a muggle and had been murdered by death-eaters for sport when Missy was ten. Her father, a mediocre wizard, had kept her from attending Hogwarts out of fear for her life. But she was still on the book of entry, and he'd already paid the fees at her birth. So she learned about the school over time and when she

was sixteen, she ran away from home and boarded the train. She was determined to get the best education she could. Hogwarts let her in. She'd always been meant to be a student and the school would do nothing to keep her out. If Missy had come at 11, she'd have almost certainly been sorted into Gryffindor. She was braver than almost everyone I've ever met."

"But she wasn't sorted into Gryffindor?"

Dumbeldore looks impossibly fond and sad. "No, she wasn't. She, like you, was older and had formed her own values. She was ambitious to gain enough power so that she could put an end to the violence against muggles. Nobody else was doing anything about their deaths. She had plans, cunning, and a desire to prove herself. She was sorted into Slytherin."

Tom lets that sink in for a moment, thinking about his value of protecting Harry above all else, and allows himself to understand his new house. "What happened to her?"

"To Missy Damier?" Dumbledore rubs a hand over his eyes for a moment before speaking. "After she graduated, she saved the lives of more than 1300 muggles from acts of senseless violence during the height of muggle-hunting. She died at age 24 protecting an elementary school from a particularly heinous death-eater initiation. But after the war, anti-Slytherin sentiment ran rampant and she had helped muggles, not wizards. I'm afraid that she was never hailed as the hero she undoubtedly was."

Tom says nothing, but thinks fiercely, *why would you tell me that?*

Dumbledore stands. "Come now my boy, I imagine the first years will be needing this cap shortly," he picks up the sorting hat, frowns, and then reflects "or more appropriately, needed it a good many minutes ago." He spreads his hand in a *what-can-you-do* kind of gesture. "Ah

well, they'll survive. It will be character building to learn the art of patience."

Tom stands as well and allows his former transfiguration professor to guide him beyond the office and past the corridors he already knows and to the Great Hall.

Before they enter, Dumbledore places a hand on Tom's shoulder. "You remind me of her."

"My mother?" Tom asks, thinking of crazy Cassiopeia Black and her inability to be anyone other than herself.

Dumbledore searches Tom's face with something that seems much too knowing and drops his hand from where it rests near Tom's collarbone. For a moment, his eyes seem to dim. "Her too," he says gently.

And then he throws on a beaming smile and opens the door to the Great Hall and the students burst into raucous applause. Tom follows behind this man who has turned himself into a living legend -- a man so very different and so very similar to the strict auburn hair professor who'd been at the helm of a different war only five decades prior.

His jovial voice carries across the room, "Sorry for the delay, but better late than early, I always say --"

Tom watches the multi-colored robes as he feels something lodge in his throat and behind his yellow and black scarf, behind these colors that feel so *wrong* and yet like they might be a part of him.

The feeling of discomfort intensifies as Dumbledore releases a belly-shaking laugh.

We've both been acting for so long, neither of us knows who we are, do we?

***

He's introduced by a beaming headmaster, (This is Tom Black, joining us from the world beyond these castle walls. He had a long chat with the hat, my apologies. You know how much the hat enjoys a good cuppa. Well. Shall we sort the first years? On with it, I say.)

He makes his way to the Hufflepuff table trying not to outwardly grimace. *Hufflepuff.*

There's something incalculably nostalgic and terrifying about being in this same great hall that he both stood in fifty years ago and three months ago -- back when he was trapped in the diary.

The diary great hall didn't have food and the sky above was always grey, but the tables were the same, the tall windows and their lattice-work panes stared at him for five decades in the echo of the home that became the confining prison of his existence.

He both loves and hates being here. He thinks about how long he spent in an exact replica of the Slytherin dormitories (the green bedspread, the couch, the view of the lake,) and he thinks a rather unpleasant thought. *I'd rather be a Hufflepuff than return there.*

As he walks past the rows of children, a blonde boy that looks *exactly*

like young Abraxas Malfoy, complete with the green and silver robes, is staring at him with frightening intensity.

Tom smirks and the boy glares back. He mouths, with all the disdain and suspicion of a pureblood prince, " *Black? Liar."*

Tom tilts his head, grins, and then turns his back on Malfoy.

It's with a quiet grace that he settles at the wrong table, his new table, and gives a shallow smile to all those badgers that now surround him.

A boy seated next to him, with sandy hair and a sharp jawline returns his smile with a full-force beam.

"Good to meet you, Tom! I'm Cedric Diggory, fifth-year prefect. If you have any questions, I'll be happy to help."

Tom's performance as a fifth-year prefect would have been no less polished, no less charming than this Cedric Diggory. *A Pureblood last name.* But Tom would have been anything but genuine. Authenticity pours out of this teen in waves. He's so bright-eyed and eager to please.

Hufflepuffs.

Tom allows his own face to adopt an easy countenance of wonder and gratitude and kindness lurking beneath the surface of his awe. "Thank you. It's all a bit overwhelming, isn't it?"

Cedric laughs good-naturedly. “Always is, the first time you see her. Hogwarts has that effect.”

A girl with blonde hair and green eyes looks at Tom with sharp eyes. “Beatrice Haywood,” she introduces. She does not extend her hand. She frowns at him. “How do you know Harry and why were you carrying him off the train?”

The name rings a bell. “Oh!” He exclaims, “you’re in Harry’s art-class. You bring him butterbeer when he forgets to take care of himself.”

She seems to melt a little. “Yeah, he can be such a stupid kid for such a talented little devil. But you didn’t answer either question.”

Hufflepuffs, Tom has decided, are delightful loyal creatures. “We’re childhood friends. And I won’t betray his privacy on why I was carrying him. He can tell you himself if he wants.”

This is clearly the right thing to say because Beatrice is cooing, and everyone is giving him approving nods, and a boy to his left (Cedric is on his right,) gives a firm nod and declares, “you, my good man, deserve the first cut of ham.”

Tom hadn’t even noticed the sorting was over and food had risen to the table. The ham looks excellent, last time he was at the school there were rations due to Grindelwald. Too many house-elves had died to make the feasts they’d once had regularly.

The ham does look rather good, Tom thinks. He savors the taste, making polite and easy conversation with the other Hufflepuffs. Beatrice is also a sixth year with him, and they will have similar schedules, she thinks.

Around a bite of mashed potatoes -- there's no meat on her plate because, as she tells him loudly and proudly, she's vegetarian -- she says, "Professor Sprout will sort you right out when you need to be sorted. So tonight, prob'ly."

Cedric says in a conspiratorial manner, "Oh you'll love the dorms. Everyone does."

Tom cannot help -- or chooses not to help -- his dubious expression.

Another girl, Elora Dunn, giggles. "Ah people say we're a load o' duffers and think we have bumblebee decorations all up the wazoo. But we always say, us Hufflepuffs are just quietly takin' over the world. No need to be all sneaky about it, or loud like Gryffindors. We just take all the best jobs with smiles and it's not cuz we want to be powerful or nothin, it's just cuz we understand people better than the rest of these fools."

Beatrice raises her cup, "Cheers to that, El." She takes a gulp of her pumpkin juice and winks at Tom. "You won't see even a single bumblebee decoration in the common room, I can promise you that."

Tamsin Applebee, the chaser for Hufflepuff team, Tom's learned, groans loudly. "I bet you five galleons that just because you said that the twins will have three or more in there before we get back."

Tom cocks his head. "The twins?"

The entire table choruses, "The Weasley twins."

Cedric says, “They’re a great laugh and wicked talented beaters, but they’re a bit… overly humorous.”

Elena snorts. “They’re right pranksters, they are. Got into the common room of us ‘puffs they’re first week of school. Menaces.”

Rohit Das, a younger year, pipes up, “Yeah, but we like them anyway.”

Tom files away the information for later that it is possible to go into the common rooms of other houses. If a pair of Gryffindors can make it into his common room, it could be easy for him to get into theirs.

Harry.

He curls his fingers into his palm and tries to ignore how worried he is. He left his artist with a capable med-witch. Harry will be fine. He has to be. There’s no other option.

The other ‘puffs notice that Tom is more withdrawn. What they think is the reason, he doesn’t care to know. But they don’t pry. They don’t ask leading questions. They just sit around him, shoulder to shoulder, and let him know that they’ll listen if he ever needs to talk. Until then, they’ll just stay by his side.

It’s not the worst thing.

***

The Hufflepuff common rooms remind Tom of how he'd always imagined a very fancy hobbit hole might look back in the days he needed fantasy. He'd read his falling apart, old and used copy of Tolkein as he sat on a dingy cot in the middle of summer wearing threadbare clothes.

After a simple pattern of beating some barrels, (this password never changes, learn it once and gain a forever home,) he enters through a limestone tunnel into the common room.

The room is large and circular. A high roof is recessed with exposed wooden beams, each artful and warm plank covered with cherry blossoms and sunflowers.

The whole room is teeming with greenery, ferns on shelves beside multicolored book covers, a carpet of sweet-smelling grass covering the floor. Every time someone steps on the grass, it glows a soft yellow beneath their heel, the color of gentle candlelight.

There are a hundred different places the ground glows as the students make their way into their home, their footsteps leaving little trails of warmth.

There are beautiful deep brown couches with yellow lace pillows for a colour pop. There is one continuous recessed window that spans that entire space of the circular room just below the ceiling. There are steps inlaid into the wall that lead up to window seats. Marigolds cascade down the left side of every carved out staircase like a yellow waterfall.

And resting on one of the Carolina Jessamine flowers that climb the walls of the common room, is a single, ornate, red and gold decorative bee.

***

Harry wakes up in the infirmary. This is not surprising anymore, he always wakes up in the infirmary at some point or another during the school year.

He is surprised, and concerned, however, at the presence of Snape sitting by his bedside. As though he can tell his being watched, the dour professor turns an angry eye on Harry.

“Ah, Mr. Potter. So kind of you to join the world of the waking at long last. I am glad to see your indolence has finally found some, albeit limited, bound.”

Harry blinks, swallows around his dry throat, blinks again, and then says, “Professor?”

“And he can address me with my proper title, I was beginning to wonder.”

Harry clenches his fist. “Why are you here, Professor?”

Snape’s lip curls. “Believe me, Mr. Potter, I would not torment myself with your grating presence was it for anything other than matters of high importance.” He sighs. “You would not stop sleeping, and though I suggested you were most likely taking little more than a mistimed nap, I was retrieved to wake you.” He withdraws a phial of swirling mist from his robes. “If you knew anything about potions, you might be able to look at this and tell me how you were woken. But I am not so much oblivious to your aberrant lack of talent and dedication to realize you are entirely unsure of what I hold here.”

If Harry felt a bit more awake, less all stretched out and in the wrong skin, he thinks he would probably say something rude back to Snape. But he just feels wrong, and Snape's words settle uncomfortably around his skin like a blanket of sharp nails.

He tries to think about how he ended up asleep, and then realizes a very pressing question, "Who was screaming?"

Snape's face goes all focused and he makes eye-contact with Harry. "Was someone screaming?" he asks in a maddeningly calm voice.

Harry feels memories rushing up without his permission. *Cold… Take Harry and run!... Stand aside… green, horrific green, cold, cold, he's picked up but it's not his mum and this woman holding him too tight is also screaming but it's so different from that other scream and where is mum and…*

He's crying, full-on body shaking sobs. Harry curls around himself and tries to pretend his most hated professor isn't sitting across from him, watching him break down. He tries to quiet his breathing only to realize he's barely breathing at all.

The cacophony of his tears is broken up by two words from Snape. "I'm sorry," the man utters, sounding utterly wrecked. The words feel monumental somehow and reverberate throughout the edges of the infirmary. Harry doesn't know what the apology is for, who it is for, and it helps his memory of his worst lived-through nightmare not at all.

Without another word, Snape stands -- Harry hears the chair move -- and then listens to his sharp footfalls as the man leaves the room.

Harry doesn't know how long he stays in that bed crying. But when he stops, he dries his tears and is glad to see that his trunk has been brought to the foot of the hospital bed instead of his dorm. There's a badly knitted tiny sock on top of it.

That's Hermione's signature if he's ever seen it. He slips out of the bed and opens his trunk, laying the sock in with his favorite items, and then pulls on his invisibility cloak and exits the infirmary.

He wanders the corridors of Hogwarts like he's still in his first year and trying to find his way to the impossible mirror where he can see the life he's always wanted, the *family* he's always wanted, but never been able to see. (Abandoned)

He hears the echo of Dumbledore's warning and his answer, a lie (it *had* to be, that couldn't be the truth) " *I? I see myself holding a pair of thick woolen socks."* But he has new avenues now for finding impossibility and he winds his way to the art room.

The moonlight seeps in from the tower's windows and bathes the dark room in glowing silver. The portraits drawn by other students (the ones with enough soul to root, at any rate) are all sleeping. The charmed sponges are lined up by the sink, the palettes rest in obedient spotless piles, but the mop is brushing the floor in what looks to be something reminiscent of sleep-walking. It's kind of cute, the mop. The class calls it "Nelly Purplelander," for reasons Harry's never bothered to ask. (The mop is decidedly brown and there's nothing purple about it.)

There's this ache in Harry's chest. He throws off the cloak and drifts to his station. He pulls out a fresh canvas and tubes of paint, letting his eyes close for a moment and finding the emotions he's buried deep -- pulls them up to the surface. He feels for a moment the phantom cold of a skeletal hand reaching for him, hears a high scream (take me instead!) and then -- then he sees blinding green. And it's silent in this room, in this tower. He's alone here. There was a flash of green, and

then Paddy came but left, Snape came but left, Hagrid and his bike and then he's being lowered and-- he's so cold, but he's just left with nothing but a note in December on a doorstep. (Abandoned.)

(It's for your protection.)

The scream. He can't unhear the scream. It rattles around, echoes through fragments of his disjointed nightmare.

He mixes obsidian with sapphire and amethyst until he's found the color of the night sky right before dawn breaks. He paints in clouds, heavy with rain, dark and rolling in the air above. They reflect in choppy water, the salt of the sea reaching his nose, the space above his brow getting splashed in droplets of ice thrown by the turbulent waves he brings into existence.

The moon reflects from its crescent all down the ocean's surface, its pale glow broken by the jagged crash of water against the shore. A thousand twinkling stars make a home for themselves in the hollows of clouds and the crests of waves.

On the dark beach, he crafts a pair of discarded shoes. They're small, new, red and gold, full of the knowledge that someone will take their first steps wearing them. And in the ocean, the grey ocean filled with the night sky and twinkling stars, he fashions oakwood and proud white sails and a boat -- no, a ship: that brings lost souls home -- anchored and begging for a storm.

At the edges of the painting, there's a tint of pale rose and a hint of peach that is mirrored in the water -- a promise that morning is coming.

But until the sun rises, there's the pair of abandoned shoes on the

beach, the ship that vows eternity for the weary, and it's rebellious look at the clouds, daring the sky for wind and downpour, as though in a storm, there is peace.

The Hogwarts sun is breaking through the windows when he finishes, his knuckles stained with their own constellations of paint. He looks at the artwork, the raging water, and he recognizes the shoes. He hears a warm voice say, " *Come on baby, just one more step, and then you've got it."*

Dudley's shoes were always too big for him. But these red and gold abandoned baby shoes, they belonged to him, once upon a time.

He wonders if he'll get them back someday. Maybe, he thinks, when he boards that ship.

He's sitting on his knees, unaware of time at all, when the door to the room is thrown open.

"...if he's anywhere they haven't looked yet, it'd be here. She should have just checked the art room first, to be honest, but McGonagall doesn't know what to do with non-stereotypical Gryffindors like Harry, I swear to you--"

Harry cranes his neck and sees Beatrice walk in with Tom trailing behind her, looking worried and furious but well-rested. He sees Harry before Beatrice does and exhales long and relieved, and breathes, "Harry, oh thank Salazaar."

Beatrice looks at him weirdly for that but doesn't comment. Tom crosses the room quickly and pulls Harry into his arms and then onto his lap.

“Don’t ever disappear again, especially not when you’re injured.”

Beatrice coughs and says, “I’m just gonna go tell people he’s been found, yeah, I’ll just--” she quickly leaves the room.

Harry relaxes into Tom’s hold, basking in the *warmth* so different from the cold. “I’ll try.” He promises.

“Not good enough,” Tom says. He rubs his hand down Harry’s arm. “You’re soaked, sweetheart.”

Harry inhales deeply. “You smell like flowers.”

Tom leans down so that his lips tickle Harry’s ears. “Do I?” He says, tone indulgent, “I suppose I can’t help it, darling. There are Frangipani woven into my bed curtains.”

Harry shivers -- still too wet he supposes -- and notices the yellow and black robes Tom is wearing.

Suppressing a laugh, he asks, “Hufflepuff? How’d you manage that?”

“Caring about you,” Tom answers, completely serious.

Harry flushes and can’t help a pleased little, “Oh,” that falls from his lips.

Tom kisses the younger boy’s neck and then rests his chin on Harry’s

shoulder. “Now tell me, darling, what got you so cold and wet?”

Harry jerks his head to the painting. The ocean is still wracked with turbulent waves spraying strays bit of saltwater.

Tom seems to be soaking it in. “That is incredible.” he says at last, “it feels like I’m seeing a piece of your soul. I can feel your grief. What is the boat?”

Harry murmurs in a wistful tone, “Charon’s Ferry.”

Tom tightens his hold around Harry. “The boat that brings the dead to the underworld.”

“I’ll board it one day.”

“No,” Tom says.

“Someday we all die.”

Tom has begun to shake as though this is new information to him, and very frightening. Harry’s never seen him like this before. He can feel Tom’s fear all down his spine.

Harry turns around in Tom’s lap so that his back is getting splashed with the waves of his creation. He cups his dripping hands on Tom’s cheeks.

They're at eye-level. "It's alright," he soothes, "when I board the ship, it'll be with you. We'll go together."

Tom reaches up his hands too and mirrors Harry by cupping the younger boy's cheeks. "Together," he tries as though tasting the word. He half-smiles, "I suppose I can live with that."

Chapter End Notes

Well I'm pretty sure I took some highly creative liberties with the Hufflepuff common room, but that's just how I envisioned it. I hope I'm doing all you reading 'Puffs proud.

All mentioned by name people actually exist in the HP universe in the year that I'm writing about. So there.

How did Snape use legimillency on Harry with the mind guardians? He didn't. He asked the question and Harry started saying the stuff aloud -- "green light, take Harry and run," without being aware of it. And Snape's a master spy. It wasn't hard to connect the dots, especially for someone knowledgeable about what dementor exposure can do: bring up your worst memories.

I need to go study acetylcholine and other exciting material (and write at least four essays,) so um, it was nice to be here, let's do it again some time. Good luck to everyone with your exams if you've got 'em, and see you in a week.

Please leave a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void, and drop a kudos if you feel so inclined.

Shamelss plugs:
Tired of waiting for updates? Check out my newly completed first-ever fanfic Another Mind Game -- It's the perfect mix of crack and angst to make you laugh and cry.

Love Master of Death fanfics? Check out my other work: Harry Potter and The Immortal's Playground

Boggart I

Chapter Notes

I'm back folks! Sorry, finals were intense. But we're good now. I hope everyone has/had an easy testing season.

I'd like to apologize in advance for this chapter. It was hard to get out and I'm not sure how I feel about it, but I think the next chapter is a winner, so it'll even out.

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Love you guys!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

First days are always awkward in Harry's experience. Before Hogwarts, the first day of school was often filled with teachers staring down his grey hand-me-downs and broken glasses in distaste. They'd sniff, look at his scar, and peg him as irresponsible… troubled, and if he was lucky, troubling. Sometimes a kind-hearted teacher would ask him to stay behind after class and inquire about his home life.

("Are you treated well at home?")

("Yes, Ma'am.")

(Is there anything you want to tell me?")

("Thank you for the lessons, Ma'am.")

It was awkward. And then at Hogwarts, well… he didn't start off exactly well his first year, did he? He remembers the feel of every eye on him, students, teachers, and even the *ghosts* watching him with avid interest as he shuffled his tiny body up to the stool. The hat settling on his head offered only a small reprieve (he was a hat-stall, so he supposes *short* is relative) before he was thrust back into the proverbial spotlight after a lifetime of hiding from any attention, positive or negative.

And second-year -- last year -- was simply a disaster. He and Ron didn't exactly come in quietly. No, they had to crash a magical and illegal car into the whomping willow and arrive late. The look Snape gave him after the incident still fills him with shivers. Harry figures whatever apology he got from the professor was a fluke or a very involved mental game that he will most certainly lose.

All this reminds Harry to feel himself a little less scared the hourglass of his acceptance will run out. He can feel the sands steadily dripping down, down and down until he will once again be hailed as the spawn of all evil. But… it never lasts. The awkward feelings or the senseless hatred. (or the acceptance) He fell down in a train because there was a darkness so deep it made him see all his nightmarish realities in vivid relief.

There was a professor who hates him standing vigil. He painted Charon's Ferry. That will always be how his story of the first day of third-year goes for him. But he has today. He has tomorrow. He has Tom, a grounding presence at his elbow, pulling him to the great hall.

The mind guardians pulse against his collarbones with warmth and apology as though they regret not being able to protect him against his worst memories.

Harry looks up at Tom as they stroll past the portrait of Sir Cadogan

who bows deeply and says, “I will inform all the scouts henceforth that the charge has been found!”

Tom smiles lightly. “Thank you, Sir.”

The knight beams, “Only my duty, young lad.” He gallops off to the next frame.

Harry tilts his head. “Were there a lot of people looking for me?”

Tom laughs. “A lot of people? Oh no.”

Harry sighs, relieved. “Good.”

“Darling,” Tom says, mirth still in his voice, “a lot of people is an understatement. Everyone was looking for you.”

Harry’s face goes pale. “Everyone?”

Tom nods seriously. “Even Draco Malfoy.” He mutters under his breath, “Especially Draco Malfoy.”

They’ve made it out of the North tower and are fast approaching the great hall when Harry and Tom are intercepted by a running Ron.

His face is nearly as red as his hair. “Harry!” He yells, skidding to a stop merely a few centimeters from Harry’s nose. “Blimey, where’ve you been? I went to visit you in the infirmary this morning and all I saw was an empty bit of bed.”

Harry blushes and scratches the back of his neck. He opens his mouth to answer but Tom cuts him off and replies, “I found him in the art classroom if you can believe it. Painting the morning away.” His voice is full of fond admonishment. The response seems to be as much for Ron’s benefit as Harry’s.

Ron looks askance at Tom. He says, slowly this time, “ *Harry* , where were you this morning?”

“Oh,” Harry says, “Tom’s right. About where I was, I mean. I just had all these feelings, you know? So I went to get them out the best way I know how and that’s painting and so I went to the art room. I feel loads better now.”

Ron draws Harry away from Tom’s grasp and drapes an arm around his shoulders. “That’s good. You know Hermione’s been telling me all about this muggle thing -- art therapy she calls it -- but it seems that a lot of people draw to get their feelings out.”

Tom glares at Ron but otherwise just falls into step with the two Gryffindors as they make their way into the hall for breakfast.

He glances at where Ron has an arm around Harry and then makes deliberate eye contact with the red-haired boy. He leans down and presses a kiss to the top of Harry’s head. “Harry, I’ll be getting breakfast with my house. See you after.”

Absentmindedly, Harry kisses Tom’s cheek from where the boy’s still bent down slightly. “Sounds good, have a nice breakfast.”

Tom straightens and ruffles Harry’s hair. “Will do.” He winks and saunters over to the Hufflepuff table.

Ron stares after him, a frown on his face. “I’m not sure about him. You’ve said you’ve known him for your whole childhood, but something about him rubs me the wrong way.”

Harry bites his lip. He’s never lied to Ron before, and he doesn’t particularly care to. “There's a long story about all that, but I’ll tell you tonight, so can you let it alone for a bit?”

Ron clenches his jaw and then relents, “Tonight.” It’s a promise.

When they slide into the Gryffindor table, Hermione is already sitting. She has three books spread out in front of her and doesn’t notice they’ve settled next to her until Ron tugs on a lock of her hair.

She mumbles, “Rude, Ronald. There are better ways to get a girl's attention,” and then goes back to reading her books.

Harry raises a brow. “Evidently. His method failed spectacularly.”

Ron lets out an outraged squawk. “You can’t be gone all morning and then be on *her* side once I find you. I was perfectly respectable.”

“Respectful, Ron, honestly,” Hermione corrects, and then she reaches up and grabs a fistful of Ron’s hair (“Ouch!”), “See? How’s that feel? There are better ways to get your attention, aren’t there?”

Ron grunts and says, “Fine, yeah. See your point, I apologize, you are a wondrous creature who is only slightly mental.”

Hermione releases his hair and sniffs. “You are a terror and a rude immature child, but I’ll accept your apology.” She seems to turn back to one of her books before blinking and then staring at Harry.

“Harry!” She gasps, “We’ve been looking for you! Well, McGonagall and Ron have, at any rate. Oh! And Neville. Well, they were before the strange knight portrait, Sir Cadogan, told us you’d been found. I assumed you were in the art room but for some reason, McGonagall was sure you’d be at the astronomy tower because that’s where your mum always went when she needed to think.”

Harry serves himself some breakfast and tea. “It’s astonishing,” he remarks as he spreads boysenberry jam on his toast, “that I am actually my own person. Most people never guess.” He still stores away the information for later -- his mum went to the astronomy tower to think. It’s a reminder that there was someone named Lily Evans (Potter) once and she loved him too -- enough to protect him.

Hermione snorts. “It should be obvious that you are not your parents, but then again, wizarding logic is categorically unsound.”

Ron makes an affronted noise. “Is not.”

Hermione takes a sip of her own tea. “Oh really? Remember how there was once the Philosopher’s stone at Hogwarts?”

Ron nods. Hermione smiles.

“And remember how Dumbledore destroyed it?”

Ron nods it again. Harry gasps as he sees her point.

“Well then,” Hermione says, “Why didn’t Dumbledore destroy the stone *before* the school-term started? Then he wouldn’t have had to make the weird trap and put a large number of children in danger from a third-floor corridor that promised certain death. There would have been nothing to protect. If he was going to destroy the stone at the end of the year, he may as well have destroyed it at the beginning. Wizarding logic is unsound: case and point.”

Ron sighs. “Well, yeah, but then how would we have known, you know, that,” Ron whispers, “old snake face is back?”

Harry tries to see his first year -- before he allowed himself to be an artist rather than the perfect hero -- as worth it for that reason, and comes up short. “But what if,” he considers, “what if we hadn’t gone and instead some random kids found it and didn’t have Hermione and died in the devil’s snare? Or didn't have you and were beaten by the chess set? What then? Would that have been worth it?”

Ron frowns. “Well no, but that’s not how it happened.”

Hermione nods. “Exactly. Wizarding logic only takes results into account. It doesn’t focus nearly enough on the hypotheticals and therefore misses half the plot if you ask me.”

Harry shrugs. “Still beats the muggle world.”

Hermione takes a bit of egg. “Maybe. They both have their good and bad sides. Like everything, really.”

The mail owls come in, and a flurry of feathers drift down from the enchanted ceiling, happily displaying the blue morning sky. Hedwig proudly delivers Harry a letter, with a muggle stamp, before affectionately nipping at Harry's fingers and flying off. A stately eagle-owl delivers him a large square parcel.

Harry looks at the mail in confusion. "I never get anything," he remarks faintly.

He opens the package first and sees the Malfoy crest on a box of… chocolates? He stares some more in confusion.

Ron is gaping. "Is that -- the Malfoy crest? Oh… don't eat any of that. Could be poisoned. Bet it is."

Harry is unmoving when he hears a, "psst, Potter!"

He turns around in his seat and sees Draco at the Slytherin table with an indecipherable expression.

"I heard you fainted," Draco says, "Like actually fainted." He mimes falling down against another Slytherin -- Pucey, if Harry's right. The Slytherins around him guffaw.

"And what of it," Harry demands, defiant. Draco's just Draco, it seems, regardless of the Malfoy's gifting him the mind guardians.

Draco gestures to the box of chocolates on the table in front of Harry, "Well, eat some already, you absolute moronic idiot. Chocolate helps with dementor exposure. How you've ever survived without my family is a miracle yet undetermined; you're like a particularly stupid baby."

The Slytherin table is unsure of what to make of Draco's comments but Harry dutifully opens the box and takes out a rather inviting truffle and eats it, ignoring Ron's (No, Harry! It'll kill you!) and Hermione's (Ron, I already did the poison check, who do you think I am?) (Not a fully trained Wizard, that's who!) (Well, I never will be one, will I? I'll be a fully trained *witch.*)

It's smooth, a blend of bittersweet cocoa that coats his tongue and a note of orange cream, sour, sweet, and refreshing all at once. His eyes half-close in pleasure.

Ron is still lecturing Harry about how he will surely die, so Harry turns his back on Draco after a mouthed "Thank you," and slides a green truffle into Ron's mouth to shut him up. He offers one to Hermione, who accepts and packs the rest away for later. He wonders if Tom likes chocolate. He bets Neville does.

Ron's calmed down considerably after eating the chocolate. "Never had pandan chocolate before. Only ever had pandan as one of the ingredients in Coverton's Common Cold Cure. It's pretty good." Harry relaxes as Ron continues, "Still not a good idea to get things from Malfoys, but just this once, I suppose -- blimey, 'Mione, you're taking *twelve* classes?"

He's leaning over Hermione's shoulder as she's taken out her schedule and appears to be annotating it furiously in the margins. "Don't be ridiculous, Ronald. That would be impossible. There's not enough time in the day."

"Yeah," he agrees, "but I see it there, and it's twelve."

"Nonsense." She slides the schedule into her pocket. "But we've got

first class in ten minutes and really mustn't be late. Not on the first day. We've two new professors this term, even if one of them is Hagrid. He's a good friend but we'll have to see how he teaches."

Harry stands. "Hagrid's great and he's loads better than Lockheart."

"Not a high bar, to be fair," Ron adds. "Our luck with defense teachers is utter shite. Kettleburn was alright though, I've heard."

It says a lot that Hermione doesn't object to the language about defense professors. Instead, she gathers up her bag and says, "Harry, what electives are you taking this year?"

"Care of magical creatures, Enchanted Artistry, and Ancient Runes."

Hermione's eyes light up. "Ancient runes? Oh wonderful, we'll have the class together."

Ron fake sobs. "Enchanted artistry? I bet I'll be the wost in Divinations now. Harry, you've abandoned me in a time of need."

"Sorry," Harry says without an ounce of regret, "I get advice from the batty sherry lady for free."

Hermione releases a put upon sigh. "Don't talk about professors that way, Harry. It's not appropriate. And let's hurry up. I don't want to miss *anything.* "

***

Harry walks Ron and Hermione back to the North tower and they continue upwards to climb the rickety ladder to get to the divinations classroom. He turns left and pushes the door open to the artroom, dutifully bows to Nelly Purplelander the mop, and sets out to his station.

Professor Badgerwood is already there, gazing at Charon's Ferry with a misty look in his quartz eyes. "Mr. Potter," the Professor says, "I should like this to be a part of your portfolio for this year."

"What portfolio?" Harry asks.

"There are no OWLS, sadly, for fifth-year enchanted artistry. Students in the sixth or seventh year of the class can send a portfolio to the international bureau of magical artwork and get evaluated there, and then the score received is given a N.E.W.T. equivalent. I think you should get a portfolio ready for the end of this year." Professor Badgerwood replies, eyes tracking waves as they crash against the shore of the painting.

"But I'm only in my third year, professor."

"So you are." Professor Bagerwood does not add anything else and after a meaningful squeezing of Harry's shoulder, shuffles away to go yell at Patricia Stimpson before she ruins her canvas forever by mixing paint with clay dissolving solution.

Harry stares for a moment at the painting, and then pulls out a fresh canvas and watercolor, losing himself to the rhythm of brushing and feeling his thoughts drift away.

***

Harry meets Ron at the bottom of the ladder and they make their way to transfiguration. “Where’s Hermione?” Harry asks.

Ron looks around. “Oh, she was here… a minute ago, I think. I dunno. Professor Trelawney is barmy, Harry. You've no idea.”

Neville catches up with Ron and Harry and they slow down. “She thinks I’ll die.” He blurts out.

“Professor Christmas Ornament said that?” Harry clarifies.

Neville is pale. “Well, not in those exact words, but she said that I’d break one of her tea sets and then get attacked by a giant snake with nothing to protect myself but a hat.”

“That’s oddly specific,” Harry notes.

“She’s absolutely amazing,” Lavender Brown comments as she and Parvati join the group of Gryffindors walking to Transfiguration.

“Practically a goddess,” Parvati agrees, and then pats Neville’s shoulder, “We’ll remember you. Forever.”

Neville goes even paler.

Hermione is somehow already in the transfiguration classroom when

they all enter, and seems to be nose deep in yet another book. Where does she have the room for so many?

"She's a fraud," Hermione whispers to Ron furiously, looking at Neville in concern. The boy is shrinking into himself and shaking.

"But it's such an easy class. Who cares?"

McGonagall sweeps into the classroom and takes one look at the chatter and drawn faces. "Sybill predicts the death of at least one student per year. She has yet to be correct."

And just like that, color returns to Neville's face.

***

Harry finds it a relief to be outside for Care of Magical Creatures.

Hagrid is standing next to a herd of animals that look to be a cross between horses and eagles.

Hermione scrunches her nose. "Those are Hippogriffs. They're supposed to be proud creatures. But they're not on OWLS or NEWTS, so I don't know why they're so many here right now. We should be studying flobberworms and hinkypunks this year."

Ron looks out at the Hippogriffs, their feathers catching sunlight on their wings, and whistles softly. "Well, I'd say we lucked out then."

Hermione is about to retort when Hagrid clears his throat in sounds reminiscent of an old automobile starting. “Welcome, welcome to Care o’ Magical Creatures. Poor Kettleburn, mind, but I’m righ’ pleased to be here with all o’ you. Today, we’re going to be looking at Hippogriffs.”

He looks at the Hippogriff and then dips into a bow. The hippogriff mirrors the behavior. Hagrid looks at the students meaningfully.

“Yeh always wait fer the Hippogriff ter make the first move,' Hagrid comments. 'It's polite, see? Yeh walk towards him, and yeh bow, an' yeh wait. If he bows back, yeh're allowed to touch him. If he doesn' bow, then get away from him sharpish, 'cause those talons hurt.”

Hagrid smiles. “Anyone want ter give it a chance?”

No one nods, so Hagrid says, “Harry, what about yeh?”

Ron pushes him forward and Harry dutifully walks forward until he and the beast are at eye level. The color of the feathers is like spun copper dipped in chocolate and coated in sunlight. It’s a beautiful creature and Harry relaxes into his bow.

The hippogriff snorts and then bows as well.

Hagrid beams. “Well done, Harry. I think yeh can touch ‘im now.”

So Harry, feeling somewhat absurd, places a hand against the hippogriff’s flank and pets softly.

After a few moments, Hagrid announces, “I think he’ll let you ride ‘im. Up and at ‘em.”

Harry looks dubiously down at the animal, but he’s not a Gryffindor for nothing, so he swings up onto the hippogriff’s back.

“Alrigh,” Hagrid says slapping the behind of the animal, “off yeh go then with Buckbeak.”

Immediately, Buckbeak lifts off into the sky. Harry clings to the warm neck as he sees the ground go smaller and smaller. For a moment, he looks out at the green sea of tree leaves that surround the black lake, the beauty of being Above so stark and contrasting to those dreams he spent in the diary.

He remembers, vividly, the landscape he’d made. He remembers that just there -- where the crop of everglades grow -- he’d painted a maze of roses and camellias. He remembers at the bank of the lake, his own Whomping Willow made mellow by Tom’s loneliness. He half expects to see Neige strutting around somewhere.

But this is not that world. That world is gone. (Dead.) He thinks that tears might be freezing on his cheeks, or before he cries them, as he mourns the loss of beautiful life.

Here, in the world Above, there are no flower mazes and albino peacocks. There are, instead, students filling up the castle grounds, a Hippogriff underneath his chilled fingertips.

He thinks that both worlds were real, the one of the diary and the one full of students, but this is the one he gets to grow up in. He’s not

capable of creation like a God here, up in the clouds, in this place where dream meets danger. He's just one person getting a glimpse of what it would feel like to be weightless.

Harry shuts his eyes against the Hogwarts that is right and wrong at the same time and allows himself to fly.

***

Tom decides that Hufflepuff is by far the best house in Hogwarts. A Hufflepuff can go anywhere -- alone, unaccompanied -- and attract exactly zero suspicion. A Slytherin can hardly use the lavatory without a Gryffindor accusing him of some nefarious plot.

They're grossly underestimated, sure, but when a Hufflepuff succeeds in class they're given an absurd number of points. Cedric, the fifth year prefect, seems to be bringing in all of Hufflepuff's points, and a third-year girl named Susan Bones, but now that the house has Tom, he's sure they have a real chance at house cup.

It took him four years of consistently playing the good guy in public to convince Hogwarts that he was one of the "nice snakes," and he's sure he'd have to spend at least five years being absolutely horrific before anyone would think ill of him as a Hufflepuff.

And his story is tragic, his face is blindingly attractive, and he is still so charming and nice. He's had three girls ask him on a date before breakfast is over, which is annoying because he's trying to see what's going on with Harry and his chocolates.

But, he supposes, he has an opportunity to live again and as much as he cares for Harry, it would be wasteful to spend every waking

moment thinking about the boy. That would be… obsessive, to say the least. He still needs time to determine what he will do with the disgusting muggle hair from Harry's relatives, and he wants to keep learning now that he has books again.

At breakfast, after some girl named Mari-something Edgecomb professes her undying love to him, Beatrice Haywood levels Tom a Look. “What’s going on with you and Harry?” She demands. “He’s too young to be dating.” There’s a “you,” that’s heavily implied.

Tom tries to envision an image of Harry dating anyone else and comes up blank. They’re not romantically involved, not yet, but… it does seem to be going that direction. No one else deserves Harry. He probably doesn’t either, but he spent five decades with no one and he is rather selfish as a result.

“We’re childhood friends,” Tom says, “Neither of us really grew up with much in the way of physical affection from our families, so we sort of leaned into each other. You know, my mother died, and Harry’s always been there for me, so I just gravitate toward him… he’s the only person I think who really *knows* me--” Tom trails off, allowing his voice to shake with imitated sadness.

Beatrice still looks a bit put-off, and Cedric is also concerned (they’d make excellent protectors for his artist) but everyone else just looks starry-eyed and sympathetic. He’s a Hufflepuff. Of course he likes to hug and be physically affectionate.

Beatrice mutters, “Never got much in the way of physical affection, huh? Oh, Harry.”

Yes, she at least will make a fine protector indeed.

***

Classes are easy as ever. Tom spends potions glowering at a dour professor who glowers back and asks questions that are increasingly complicated and dark -- trying to catch him up he supposes -- but he knows enough of the laws to say, “I don’t know about that one” if the answer would implicate him as brewing something illegal.

The Professor, Snape, seems to go from frustrated to begrudgingly respectful over the course of the questioning and the Hufflpeuffs and Ravenclaws are watching in fascinated awe.

Finally, Snape says softly, “Goblin blood was made illegal in 1982, Tom. Tell me, have you actually used it in Shachor Mayim before?”

The potion in question supposedly translates to dark water and is used as a kind of gentle imperious to force drinkers into a highly suggestible state for around twelve hours. It was still legal during Tom’s era.

“Well,” Tom says around a cough, “I couldn’t say. I know my mother used goblin blood on occasion in her brews, but we were quite… separated from the wizarding world you could say.”

Snape nods. “Yes,” he agrees silkily, “you would have been. Mr. Black,” it’s the first time Tom’s been addressed by the teacher directly, “fifty points to... *Hufflepuff*. Let us see if you can brew as well as you can speak.”

Tom partners with Beatrice and they proceed to outclass the Ravenclaws thoroughly. Some things never change.

***

The defense against the dark arts professor looks like he's wearing second-hand robes that only fit him in the loosest sense. Rather than the burst of condescension Tom expects to feel, he only sees the relatable jut of the man's jaw, a need to prove that he does *belong*. Tom recognizes him as the Professor who was able to summon enough of a Patronus to drive away some of the dementors on the train.

"Hello, Class. Please pull out your wands. Today we'll be doing a practical demonstration. I am Professor Lupin, by the way."

Bemused, Tom does as asked and follows with the remainder of the class to the Staff lounge.

"... A boggart so I thought what could be better practice?" The professor is saying. "Are you all familiar with the Riddikulus charm? You are in your sixth years but I know that instruction in this discipline has been inconsistent, to say the least."

There are general grumbles of agreement, but Tom is too caught up in his own thoughts to notice particularly. What will be his worst fear, he wonders? It used to be his own death, but somehow that does not feel right. Not anymore.

He realizes he's in a line, that they're all getting a turn at the boggart. Someone's Boggart is a house fire, another's is -- the mark of his *knights* ? -- well, he has been a busy bastard, the monster left behind in this world. Beatrice's boggart is an image of a wasteland with corpses dotting the broken ground.

She looks disturbed but says, firmly, "Riddikulus," and the corpses all melt into flowers and trees that turn the wasteland into a thing of

beauty. He's reminded that this is a woman in Harry's art class and that she may not be nearly as talented as his treasure, but she still has worlds in her mind.

When Tom steps forward, his dragonhide boots click deliberately on the ground and his shoulders are square. The paradise transforms and Tom stares impassively… but then. Then there is static.

Harry's dying on the ground in front of him. No one is doing anything, and Tom is rushing forward. How did Harry get up here? He was supposed to be with Hermione in Care of Magical Creatures.

"Something went wrong, Tom," he's saying. He holds out his hands, which are mangled and bloody, falling off at the wrists. "There was an accident, and I can't create anymore --" he coughs a bit of blood, but Tom pays it no mind and moves to cradle Harry.

"Shh, you'll be alright, it'll be okay, my darling," he says, desperately trying to find a heartbeat, but feeling nothing. He's casting diagnostics, but they all seem to think Harry isn't even alive anymore.

Harry says one last thing, pained and weak "Live, for me, please," before he falls limp, wrists bloodied, eyes open and unseeing. Tom looks in horror as every piece of artwork Harry's ever made -- the ferry, the boat in the lake, the winter wonderland for the Malfoy's -- begin to burn. He hadn't even noticed they were in this room. There's nothing left of Harry at all now. Every last piece is gone.

And his artist asked him to live. So he'll have to stay here, alone, without him, in this dark and horrific world.

Tom hates everything deeply. He's furious. He wanted Harry to live. He wanted them to live together. He's had nothing for so long, he

finally found someone to care about -- and now, that's just gone.

Someone is trying to say something, to get him to move from where he's still cradling Harry's cold corpse, but he won't go. They can't make him.

He focuses on his feelings and realizes something in a moment of startling clarity. There are children behind him, a professor is hovering anxiously and trying to talk to him.

This feeling rattling around in his bones is terrible and horrific. It's love affection with nowhere to go. It's... anguish. But it isn't real. This isn't real.

He stands and lets go of the fake corpse with an expression of disgust. He has never felt such contempt for a being before. "Riddikulus," he all but spits, and the imposter Harry and the burning paintings all condense into one single blank canvas, something for his artist to make beautiful.

He wipes the fake blood from his cheek and stares back at the classmates who are looking at him with faces of concern and shock.

He turns away. For so long he had no one to care for. He spent his childhood fighting every single person indiscriminately. Voldemort exists as a being of complete greed and selfish desire.

But Tom, he's learned affection and now he's learned despair. He's learned what it feels to be full of sadness and anger so deep he felt he would rather scratch his arms into nothingness than continue. And yet… it means he's perhaps more alive than Voldemort has ever been. He shudders at the memory of Harry freezing cold in his arms and knowing he must continue into a thousand empty sunrises. He has

learned *grief*.

... He does not regret.

Chapter End Notes

Ehehehe any guesses on what Tom's gonna do to the Dursleys? Find out next chapter.

Sorry about any errors! This chapter was rough, but stick around for the next one... it'll be better, I promise.

Please leave a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void.

Leave a kudos if you feel so inclined.

Happy Holidays folks!

Boggart II

Chapter Notes

> Happy New Year ladies and gentlemen and all you folks in-between and out of the system!
>
> What's this? Updating before it's been a full two weeks? Who am I?
>
> For your reading pleasure, I present you with one of my longer chapters. A lot happens, but I think it's all worthwhile. This chapter is the very definition of fluff and angst. There's quite a bit of both.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Tom is asked to stay after class. Professor Lupin casually leads Tom to the defense office: a cluttered but organized mess. He hastily drops a potion clearly not meant for prying eyes into a desk shelf.

Interesting. Professor Lupin collapses into the tattered chair behind the desk and rubs a tired hand over his eyes before taking a deep breath and staring up at Tom with an unfathomable expression.

He finally says, “Would you like to take a seat?”

In response, Tom wordlessly conjures an armchair and gracefully sits down, posture relaxed and powerful. Professor Lupin raises a brow at the display. “Impressive,” he murmurs.

Tom gives the professor a look of confusion that is clearly at odds with his body language -- the one questioning, the other dominant. “Why am I here, Professor?”

Professor Lupin steeples his hands on the surface of the desk. “I’ve

been told that you and Harry Potter are childhood friends," he begins.

"We are."

"I do not know exactly how the two of you came to be as close as you clearly are, and truth be told, such things are not precisely my business. I am, or rather was, a close friend to Harry's father, but I'm afraid thirteen years absent do not render me a friend of Harry."

Tom keeps his expression blank but considers the information so freely given. He's learned quite a bit about Professor Lupin from just those few words. He has the ability to learn much more. *Gryffindors.*

"I'm afraid I don't understand what you are trying to say," Tom remarks.

"That's because I haven't said it yet, I imagine," Lupin laughs a little and then his voice turns serious and intense. "Mr. Black, friends are delightful and important aids to strong mental health. But I could not let the display I saw earlier go unaddressed in good conscience. You lost your mother over the summer, did you not?"

"I did."

"I understand, truly I do, what it feels to be clinging with both hands to the people -- person -- you have left. But Tom, to have your worst fear be about someone else can be… indicative, shall we say, of dependence. It is important to have a support network, but dependence on a single person is a bit of a… warning sign for some less than savory outcomes."

Tom grimaces. “Such as?” His voice is sharp and cold.

Lupin is unaffected. “You might begin to smother Harry and cause him to pull away from your company, which right now, might leave you volatile. Some people with dependencies isolate the object of their affections. It may not turn into anything, but I would urge you to branch out beyond Harry. You are at school for the first time after a tragedy and it is natural to cling to what and *who* is familiar to you. However, Tom, you’ve been given the chance to live a full life amongst people like you. Take advantage of that.”

Tom envisions Harry distancing himself from Tom. He remembers, vividly, Harry saying, "I need more time."

To go through such a thing again, to spend every night searching for a boy who did not want to be found, to find his artist only for the marvel to slip away… that would be *unacceptable.*

And Tom has been given a second chance at life. He should *live.* With Harry, of course, but the Professor does not need to know that.

“Thank you, Professor. I think I’m shaken by people I love dying more than Harry specifically dying if that makes sense. My mum just died, and she told me my father is probably dead too -- so Harry is all I have left. I guess I fear being alone.”

Lupin’s expression softens all at once. *The fool bought it. Of course it’s about Harry specifically, but that makes me look like all the things he’s worried about… a warning sign for a controlling person.*

“That makes sense,” Lupin says quietly, “I apologize if I’ve offended you in any way, but everything I said still stands true. The more people you can connect with, the more people you can grow to love.

There's no limit. You don't have to be alone any longer."

Tom pretends to blink back tears. "Thank you, sir. I appreciate it."

"You're a good kid, Tom. Hogwarts, for reasons I cannot fathom, does not have any mind healers on site, but it might be best for you to talk to Pomona, your head of house. She can help you feel better and deal with your grief."

"Thank you, sir."

***

Tom does not immediately return to his common room. Instead, he winds his way to the sixth floor and paces back and forth three times. *I need a room where I can curse the Dursleys, I need a room where I can curse the Dursleys, I need a room --*

As always, a door appears then opens. He wonders if Hogwarts remembers him and the meetings he held half a century ago in the same space with different people.

He walks inside and looks around, seeing a few books lying beneath stone columns. Dark magic done in this space will not leave the confines of the room and alert anyone to his activities. And the wand he is currently using does not have the trace because it was made mostly from Harry's magic and a strange bit of… shared memory, Tom supposes. He's still not entirely certain how exactly Harry came to draw a broken yew wand, or why Tom was able to fix it with a simple Reparo. Art and soul magic, clearly, works in odd ways.

Tom pulls out the hair of Petunia and Vernon from his cloak pocket, each strand in a phial and labeled.

He begins to browse through the books the room provides, attempting to find the perfect spell. He does eventually find one fitting for Petunia. It centers around nightmares.

He'll need some of Harry's blood to make it work -- but no matter. He has that with him as well, because he's collected everything he might need from Harry whilst the boy stayed with him during the last few summer weeks. They shared a bed after all and it was prudent to prepare for any future complications. He has some of Harry's hair as well as fingernail clippings and a small sample of skin. (Harry doesn't know Tom has these things, but that's alright. Tom will only ever use his collection to protect his little artist.)

He would have liked one of Harry's baby teeth -- there's so much one can do with baby teeth -- but he hadn't known Harry in time to collect any.

He mixes a droplet of Harry's blood in a cauldron the room seems to conjure with a bit of water and Petunia's hair. Through a spell the book gives him, he melts the three ingredients together until he is left with a diluted brown-ish red liquid.

He draws runes into the ground, a small circle of them centering around one more of Petunia's hairs. Then he says, *"Ad Somnia Consientium, salutem in carcere."*

He feels the room grow bright as the magic takes hold. Petunia will have nightmares now, every night, of Harry's experiences as a child. She will feel his loneliness, his pains, his bruises and his hunger whenever she sleeps and often as she wakes.

The only place she will feel safe will be the cupboard under the stairs.

It is an ironic and fitting punishment. There's a part of him that longs to murder her, but Harry would probably be anguished over the loss of his relative. He's given Petunia a chance at true peace -- if she ever regrets what she did to Harry, if she can change forever how she treats him, the nightmares will end. If the stupid Dudley being halfway-decent could give Harry so much happiness, Petunia could surely do the same. Leaving the possibility of redemption open to her will grant Harry the chance to one day have more family.

And, more importantly, death is a pain that comes just once. The mental torture he's impressed upon Petunia will rob her of sleep, self-perception and her relationships. Vernon will not like a wife with waking nightmares. It's rather more refined than his previous favorite punishment. Crucios only do so much. Fear is a motivator but it does not change a person's perceptions of the world. To be able to change a life so utterly is true power.

Tom stares down at the hair he has of Vernon. His hands are wracked with tremors. There's a sheen of sweat on his brows. Rituals that alter minds are work and he is drained at the moment.

Harry does not seek out Vernon's love. He could very easily just kill the muggle and be done with the whole thing. But… Vernon is unpleasant. He will either leave Petunia within the year or she will leave him. Dudley will probably distance himself from his father.

Tom packs the hair away. He'll revisit in a few years what to do about the odious man. After fifty years in the diary, he's learned patience.

Chances are, Vernon will ruin his own life. The best cards are the ones you make other people play.

***

When he does make it back to the Hufflepuff common room, it becomes clear that not only Harry is worth search parties. Cedric and Beatrice are reportedly still out looking for Tom. Zacharias Smith, Tom's least favorite housemate, clasps him on his back.

With a rude tone, the tall boy says, "We were all worried you were *crying* in some store-room closet." And then, because Smith is still in the house of the loyal, he sniffs and asks in a tone pretending disinterest, "But you're not such a big baby, are you?"

Tom always feels shaky after particularly taxing magic and mind magic certainly classifies. He's shivering, lightly. He manages a spectacularly unconvincing smile and says, "I'm fine."

He's not even surprised when he's offered half a dozen chocolate bars from all over and a younger year -- a girl with blonde pigtails and a name he will never learn, comes over from halfway across the room leaving a trail of lights from beneath her heels.

She gives him a gentle hug as though he is made of glass. She smiles up at him. "You'll be alright Tom. We can be your family too."

It's the sort of thing he should absolutely look at and sneer. He has no need for anything like this. But. But. He's tired and shaken.

All he can say is, "Oh."

She goes back to do whatever it is eleven-year-old girls occupy themselves with, and Zacharias Smith goes off to do whatever ponces occupy themselves with, and Tom is left with six unwrapped chocolate bars.

Cedric and Beatrice reappear in the common room quickly and look at Tom with no small amount of relief.

Beatrice comes forward and checks Tom for any obvious injuries. Then she says. “That was brutal, wasn’t it?”

Cedric nods. “The fifth years also had the boggart lesson. You can ask someone else about mine… but--” Cedric swallows, “Well, professor Sprout helped me out a bunch right afterward. She wants to see you too. You should go to her office, I promise she’ll help.”

Tom wants absolutely nothing less, but all these damn Hufflpuffs look so hopeful that he’ll go and speak to the professor, as though she can somehow fix him and his “irrational” but intense fears.

“It’s not irrational.” He wants to shout. “ *Harry really could die. And then I would really be on my own.”*

But his middle is still warm from the clumsy hug of a small child. He still holds six chocolate bars in his hands. Being alone seems something that maybe, one treacherous part of himself whispers, maybe won’t ever happen again.

So he goes.

***

Professor Sprout’s office is decorated like the common room. Flowers climb the sides of the stone walls and several potted plants line the

shelves. They seem to be *dancing.*

Professor Sprout is sitting on a yellow couch that should be hideous but seems calming in its own way. Tom enters the room quietly and she waves him over. Her desk is piled high with papers and the armchair behind it is empty.

He takes a seat on the opposite her on the sofa and puts his bag at his feet. He looks at the woman with her black and yellow embroidered dress robes and cheeks that are always a little bit red. She's not a thin woman and her arms are the sort that look like they were made for hugging. He imagines she's embraced many snot-nosed Hufflepuffs missing home in her tenure.

She doesn't say anything. She merely looks at Tom with sad grey eyes.

Uncomfortable, Tom says, "I heard you wanted to see me?"

Professor Sprout nods. "I did. But the question, Tom, is not about what I want. I want many things. I do not want any of my students to be exposed to a boggart. I do not want children to stare down their greatest fears without the support they surely need. I do not want the students of this school to be in danger ever. I want the worst thing they have to worry about be if they look beautiful or handsome enough for a first date. I want so many things, Tom. I will admit that I want you to talk to me. But these are my desires. The question, my dear, is what do *you* want?"

She is so unlike Professor Slughorn it's astounding. He remembers his second year when the older members of Slytherin objected to the prodigy "mudblood," and seventh-year Rowle sent a tongue severing curse. *Magic should not be defiled by your dirty spoken words. Oh, what's that? Kneazle got your tongue?* Madame Merriweather had managed to

grow his tongue back and informed his head of house.

Slughorn bustled into the infirmary, all soft lines and finery draped robes. He asked Tom what happened. Even then, twelve years old and inexperienced, Tom recognized the glint in the man's beady eyes.

The man wanted answers for gossip and making networks with alumni. Slughorn wanted to better understand the political structures of his house and determine how much one excellent outsider was changing the hierarchy. He did not want to help Tom.

The lesson Tom learned from that situation he's carried with him. *Information freely given is information lost.* It's always better to withhold what people want and give it later -- at a price.

Professor Sprout doesn't care what Tom tells her. She does not care about Harry Potter or dangerous relationships. Or maybe she does, but right now she cares about *Tom.* If his tongue had been severed by one of her badgers she probably would have rained down hellfire and made sure Tom was alright, not just physically, but emotionally too.

He doesn't know how to act toward someone like that. There's nothing to trade her for. Dumbledore will make exchanges for his supposed greater good, Slughorn would trade nearly anything to sate his greed. The only thing Professor Sprout wants is for her students to be healthy.

Tom still hasn't spoken and Professor Sprout continues to look at him with her empathetic grey eyes. He remains silent. Finally, she says, "I have work to do. You're welcome to stay if you'd like."

She gets up from the couch and goes behind the desk. She begins to flip through papers and mark them.

Tom doesn't want to talk to her about Harry, or his fear of being trapped in a diary again, or that he will turn into the monster he in some ways became in another life. He doesn't know if he ever will.

Her quill makes scratches against parchment and she starts to hum softly. Tom doesn't recognize the tune but it's the kind of thing he wonders if she sings to baby Puffs when they can't sleep and want their mothers.

He knows he should grimace. That's what Tom would have done, twelve years old and tongue bleeding.

Instead, he pulls out his homework from his bag and begins to work, slowly but surely starting to hum along.

Professor Sprout's hand pauses for one moment and then resumes its grading.

***

When Harry lands back near where the class is congregated, Draco looks a mess. The Slytherin's robes have been scratched all over and strips of black fabric ripple in the gentle breeze. The side of his face is covered in dirt and his eyes are burning.

Hagrid has his hands raised. "... Yeh're alrigh, ain't yeh?" He's saying somewhat angrily. Harry notices that the hippogriffs have all been put behind a pen that Buckbeak has decided to land within. He slides off buckbeak and looks at the pen, trying to figure out the best way to

jump the wooden fence. Hermione spots him through a crack and her eyes go huge for a moment before she turns and starts stalking toward where Hagrid and Draco are yelling at each other.

" *Alright?"* Comes Draco's shrill disbelieving voice. "That bloody chicken could have taken my arm off!"

Hagrid rolls his eyes. "It got a bit of yer robe. Yeh're fine. Yeh didn' bow and she was a tad offended. Yeh'll know better next time, won't yeh?"

Draco makes an affronted noise. "Next time? You can't honestly believe I'll let this stand. There will be no next time. My father will hear about this!"

Dean snickers and says, mocking, "Oh no. Malfoy's going to tell his daddy about his fashion emergency."

Draco turns on Dean. "And what if the beast had taken your arm off? What then? Would you be laughing? Harry's still up there and maybe he's fallen and none of us know. This is dangerous and if I'm the only one to see it, then so be it!"

Pansy Parkinson makes a cooing noise. "Draco, darling, I agree with you."

Blaise Zabini fakes a gag.

Hagrid sighs. "It's good yer worried about Harry, but he's probably having the time of his life. The boy's a born flier."

Harry feels his hair getting nosed by a hippogriff.

Draco says, “Who said I was worried?” at the same time Harry says, “Em, excuse me? Hagrid?”

No one hears him but thankfully Hermione has reached Hagrid and then she says, calm as anything, “Harry’s in the pen with Buckbeak, Hagrid. Might be best to get him out.”

Ron says, “In the pen, you said?” As Hagrid says, “See?” To Draco and as Draco says, audibly, “Oh thank Salazaar.”

In the end, Hagrid skillfully maneuvers Harry away from the congregation of Hippogriffs who have been nuzzling his hair with a single-minded attention.

Proud as anything, Hagrid puts his huge hands on Harry’s tiny shoulders. “They like yeh,” he says eyes suspiciously bright, “Yer a good sort, Harry.”

Harry smiles. “Thanks, Hagrid.”

Hagrid returns the smile full force before it falls. Bending down, he whispers in Harry’s ear, “But be careful, Harry, of that Tom boy. He does anything and ye come to me, understand? He’s dangerous, he is.”

Harry nods. “I’ll do that.”

Hagrid smiles again. “Good man, Harry.”

The Slytherins and Gryffindors make their way off the grounds and back into the castle. Hermione smooths down Harry's hair best as she can. (It's not a whole lot.)

Neville seems to be having the time of his life talking to Lavender Brown.

"What's that about?" Harry asks, jerking his head in their direction.

Hermione grimaces. "They're debating how a hat might be able to protect against a snake, and what kind of snake Neville might meet. It's a load of absolute Hogwash if you ask me."

Ron grins. "But they didn't ask you. And I say that Neville looked a right shade paler than death this morning so if he's happy now who are we to take it from him?"

Hermione flicks Ron's ear. "I never said he doesn't deserve to be happy. It's only that I think pursuing fake prophecies only ever leads to downfall."

Harry shrugs. "Or having sex with your mum."

Ron shudders. "Gross mate."

"He was talking about *Oedipus* Ron."

“Bless you.”

“It’s a famous Greek legend.”

Harry nods. “Bénigne Gagneraux painted some spectacular scenes from Oedipus.”

Hermione turns to consider Harry. “I didn’t know you knew much about famous painters.”

They’ve arrived at the fat lady. Ron says, “Birchwater lemon tails,” and the door swings open.

“Well,” Harry replies, “I am an art student. There’s this thing that people who like making art tend to like looking at it.”

Hermione bristles, “I know that,” she says, “I just think it’s wonderful.”

“And I think that it's wonderful you think so,” Harry says.

Ron looks at them. “Well, not to break up this wonderful moment but I have some questions for Harry about Tom.”

“Can we do it in the dorm room? I don’t want to talk about it here.” Harry asks.

Hermione frowns. “Oh of course, just leave me out why don’t you?”

Ron blurts, “Girls can get into the boy’s room, can’t they?”

“But it’s still against the rules!” Hermione protests. Harry gives her a flat stare.

A few minutes later the three of them are huddled on Harry’s bed with the curtains tied up.

Ron sighs. “I don’t like how touchy he is with you. It feels proprietary somehow.”

Hermione glances at Ron with confusion. “If you know that word, why don’t you use it more often?”

Ron falls against a pillow. “Because then you’d have expectations.”

Hermione huffs. "I already have expectations."

Ron says, "They'd be worse. But what of Tom, Harry?"

Harry holds his knees against his chest.

“I don’t talk about it a whole lot, but my childhood wasn’t… great.”

Ron grimaces. “I could have guessed that from the bars on your window.”

Hermione makes a noise in the affirmative. (She’s heard this story before from two irate Weasley twins.)

Harry insects one of his nails. “I didn’t get told I love you a whole lot. Or ever. Um. The first time I got a hug was from Hermione in the hospital after the whole sorcerer stone thing. So Tom, he holds me and cares for me, and I know to other people it might be too much, but I think I need it. I feel so lonely sometimes, but he’s there for me, you know? He’ll always hug me. And maybe, maybe he doesn’t love me. But he needs me too. And I think that’s enough.”

Ron’s face goes all sad and fond. “You know I do love you, Harry, right? I love you like I love Charlie because he’s my best brother. He’s cooler than you, though.”

Harry lets something between a sob and a giggle. “I try to know that. I love you too.” He looks at Hermione who seems to be blinking back tears. “And I love you.”

Hemione throws herself into Harry’s arms. “Of course I love you. I didn’t realize that was your first hug or I would have, should have --” She dissolves into meaningless grumbles as Ron joins the cuddle pile.

“Though,” Hermione says after she’s collected herself, “If the first time you were ever hugged was in your first year, how is Tom your childhood friend?”

Ron nods vigorously and Harry feels the hairs tickle his cheek.

“Well, so you see --”

In simple terms, he explains finding the diary and drawing in it, and the dreams and the writing to each other and Ron says, (Never trust something if you can't see where it keeps its brain!) And Hermione is scary silent.

And Harry doesn't talk about Tom being Voldemort's soul but he does start crying in earnest when he talks about the day Tom came to life and all his creations died.

They miss dinner.

Ron seems to understand a little about Tom but says, "I still don't like him."

Hermione seems a million miles away. "I wonder how someone gets trapped in a diary," is all she says.

When Seamus comes into the room he's greeted by the site of the three of them cuddling on the bed.

"Is this polyamory?" He asks semi-seriously.

Ron shakes his head. "Platonic love."

Dean pokes his head in. "Oh, hey 'Mione."

"Hey, Dean."

Neville wanders in and looks at the group. “Can I join?” He asks shyly.

Harry holds out his arms. “Get in here, Nev.”

Ron says, “See, Harry? We’ll all give you hugs.”

Seamus groans. “Speak for yourself. I certainly won’t.”

***

The next day, Harry finds himself with sweating palms in Defense Against the Dark Arts. He’s heard from several people that he will be facing a boggart with the rest of the class. He also knows that Tom’s boggart was Harry’s own death.

Many people have been asking him if he and Tom are an item or what their relationship is “really,” but Harry’s ignored them valiantly. Tom was suspiciously absent at breakfast and was unable to either dismiss or substantiate any rumors. (Harry heard that Tom was helping Professor Sprout with something.)

Harry’s fairly certain his greatest fear is those creatures he saw on the train. He can still remember the way he felt when the cold was seeping into his blood. He can see the absence of a face, a dark hood, and hear the scream… the blood-curdling scream.

Harry barely registers the teacher introducing himself, or the class

following the man in second-hand robes to the staff room.

He does notice Snape sneering at Lupin with the kind of hatred he had previously reserved for Harry before the man sweeps out to the corridor.

Neville's boggart is Snape himself, and Harry admits to finding it amusing when the Riddikulus spell creates an image of the potions master in a feathered hat.

Hermione's worst fear is McGonagall telling her that she failed not only all of her classes but also all of her friends and that she is going to be expelled for lacking magic and posing a danger to the students of the school. She screams, cries, sniffs, and then says, "Riddikulus."

McGonagall turns into an apple screaming about Hermione's bad grades and the girl smirks and says, "You're just a fruit."

Ron's boggart is an enormous spider that he gives roller skates. Harry stands to take his turn but Lupin steps in front of him and the boggart turns into a white orb that Lupin then makes take the shape of a deflating balloon before locking the boggart back in the cabinet.

Lupin says cheerily, "Well done! You are all excellent. That was a promising first lesson given the state of your last two years in this discipline."

As everyone begins to shuffle away, Harry hangs back. "Professor?" He asks.

The man looks at Harry. "What can I do for you, Mr. Potter?"

“It’s just, I didn't have a go at the boggart.”

“Ah,” The man says, “Well, after Tom’s boggart yesterday, I thought yours might be a little disturbing and private. If you’d like, you can come practice this afternoon.”

Harry nods. “Yes, thank you.”

“I’ll be in my office.”

***

After a class of ancient runes with Hermione which Harry thoroughly enjoys, he makes his way to the defense office. Lupin is grading papers when Harry comes in but he looks up with a smile.

“Ah, Harry. Shall we see about this boggart? I moved the cabinet in here just for you.”

Harry swallows nervously. “Thank you, I guess. I just feel like I need to be prepared for anything.”

Lupin’s eyes are understanding. “Of course you do. You understand how Riddikulus works, yes?”

“Yes,” Harry says.

“Just imagine your worst fear and make it something amusing. The clearer image in your head, the easier it will be to fight the boggart.”

“Okay.”

“Well then, here we go.”

Lupin unlatches the closet and immediately the room starts to grow cold. Harry is freezing. His fingers feel like ice. The creature is getting closer and he tries to fight against the chill and the darkness. He can’t remember what he’s trying to do. There’s nothing funny about the creature or the scream he’s hearing.

Stand aside you silly girl --

*Take **me** instead*

He flinches at a flash of green light and curls up. And then, suddenly the cold is gone and there’s a silver wolf resting at his feet.

Harry feels a hand on his shoulder.

“A dementor,” Lupin says thoughtfully, “Your father would be proud.”

Harry relaxes slightly. “My father, sir?”

“Oh, he and I were rather close. Nothing says Gryffindor more than your worst fear being fear itself.”

“I was useless,” Harry says despondently.

“Not so. There are ways to protect against boggarts and dementors. That wolf at your feet, he’s a Patronus. I can teach you to make one if you’d like. It’s hard magic, but I think you’ll be able to manage.”

Harry forces himself to stand. Lupin looks at him with far too much affection for just a professor.

“Right,” he says, “A Patronus. Yeah, I’d like to try.”

Lupin says, “Excellent. Think of your happiest memory and then say the words ‘Expecto Patronum,’ with this wand movement,” Lupin demonstrates. “Go on then, give it a go.”

Harry thinks about last night when Ron and Hermione told him they loved him. “Expecto Patronum.”

Nothing happens. Lupin shrugs. “You’ll get there. Come back tomorrow, won’t you?”

Harry feels defeated and frustrated. He sighs, “Yeah. I’ll be back.”

****

He falls into a routine. He spends every Thursday in Lupin’s office trying to fight the feeling of ice and hearing his mother’s desperate pleas.

He spends every Friday afternoon with Tom in the Hufflepuff common room or in the older boy's bed (the Hufflepuffs have gotten used to Harry and Tom's odd relationship and only Zacharias Smith will complain about them being inapropriate), being held and told that he’s alright. Ron and Hermione are wonderful but neither of them understands what it is to feel trapped in your own skin -- to know something terrible is going to happen and you are absolutely helpless to stop it.

That’s the worst part. Even more than not being able to make a Patronus, Harry hates that he can never save his mum. He can't help but detest that there’s a small part of him that wants to stop fighting against the boggart if only to be able to focus, for one mere second, on the sound of his mother’s voice.

He says to Tom, one Friday when they're both under the covers of Tom’s bed in their pajamas and the older boy is mindlessly tracing patterns on Harry’s collar bones, “Aren’t you going to tell me to stop practicing my Patronus?”

Tom doesn’t pause his tracing and his blunt nails leave goosebumps in their wake. “Why would I do that, sweetheart?”

“I’m a mess and this isn’t helping.”

Tom puts a thumb over one of the mind guardians. Harry shivers. Tom smirks and then circles the stone with his index finger. “No darling, I won’t tell you to stop. I will never coddle you to the point you are left unable to protect yourself. This is something you need to learn.”

Harry scooches forward until he can rest his nose against Tom's shoulder. "It's scary. What if I can never make one?"

Tom presses a kiss to Harry's brow. "You can. You will. I know you will."

Hogsmeade weekends help him feel a bit better as well. If one good thing came from the summer, it was Petunia signing his permission slip. Beatrice always buys him butterbeer, Hermione gets books on ancient runes and famous magical painters with him, and Ron and the twins bring him to Zonko's and they have great laughs.

He and Tom and any friends that want to will often spend a few moments on a bench, watching the world go by.

Most Mondays, Dudley sends him a letter. They never fail to make Harry smile. He learns that Dudley's joined the boxing team and has decided to stop eating so many sweets. He sends back letters filled with doodles and bits about his life, careful to never explicitly mention magic because his cousin attends a muggle school.

Even so, Harry feels like he's drowning. He paints a single red leaf drifting in a storm, getting drenched in falling grey rain and caught in violent winds.

He paints the bottom of a lake in winter, fish lethargic in the cold. There's a coat of ice on the top of the water and light shines down in a thousand different places, each sparkle refracted by frost. Cracks are blooming in a deadly imitation of spring. If you stand close enough to the painting, you can hear the sounds of the lake's surface beginning to break.

There are silhouettes of shoes visible on the top of the ice, darkness emboldened by the sunlight of winter.

And the cracks continue to form, slowly. The fish continue to drift listlessly.

Someone will fall into the water soon.

***

There are two weeks to Christmas when Harry knocks on Lupin's door once more to attempt the Patronus. The closest he's managed to get in these last few months has been a single bit of silver-ish smoke. Lupin assures him his progress has been very impressive, but Harry thinks impressive isn't good enough -- not for this.

As always Lupin smiles and holds up a mug of hot chocolate. Back at the beginning of these sessions, he'd said, " *Chocolate helps and hot chocolate was Lily's favorite."*

It might be worth living through his worst fear just for the little tidbits he gets from Lupin about his parents.

"Are you ready to try again?" Lupin asks.

"Always."

The professor lets the boggart out of its closet and immediately it takes the form of a dementor. Today, Harry has decided, he really will just let himself listen to his mother's voice. He can try in earnest next

week. But for right now, he thinks his happiest memory will be that his mother loved him enough to ask, “Take me instead.”

He stares at the dementor (boggart) dead-on, looking into where its eyes would be.

It’s still cold. He’s wrapped up in the kind of chill that goes beneath your skin, under bones, and wraps around your heart in a grip of ice.

But… the boggart isn’t a real dementor. There’s no danger here of his soul being taken, the only danger is his own mind.

He’s not scared of the cold. Not really. He’s been cold before. He has memories of shivering in a closet with only a thin blanket and the heating turned off when his relatives went on a day trip to who knows where. He wasn’t scared then. Before he even had a name for it, he was using magic in little ways to protect against the cold, to protect against bad haircuts and locked doors and pain.

The cold right now reminds him that magic is real. And magic is one part of life Harry will never fear. So he stops fighting against the chill and welcomes it.

For a moment, he experiences perfect clarity and calm. He’s seeing, as though he’s out of his own body, his mother twenty one and beautiful. Her eyes are a familiar shade of green and wide with terror. Her red hair whips around her head with the force of her shivers.

Voldemort -- for it must be Voldemort -- is walking toward her with deliberate footfalls, so reminiscent of the way Tom walks. But where Tom is full of vibrance, Voldemort is statuesque and monotone.

Harry stares at his mother eagerly even knowing how this scene ends.

He hears thoughts that are not his own and unbidden a memory floats to the surface of his mind. He has an echo of Professor Trewlaney saying from beneath too many shining necklaces and pounds of glittering powder, "soul sight is a forgotten gift, use it wisely."

He hadn't understood what she meant then, but as he stares at his young mother in the moments before tragedy takes her from the world, he does.

He knows on one level that this cannot be real. This moment exists only in his mind. And yet… magic makes the impossible real if only in his head.

He can feel his mother's thoughts. She's shaking and thinking, desperately, *I don't want to die. I don't want to die. Please, I don't want to die.*

She's looking back at the baby in the crib, his young self.

I want to watch him grow up. I want to be there when he starts riding on a broomstick and when he plays his first prank on his father. Merlin, James will deserve it. I want to be there when he gets his Hogwarts letter. I want to write him back when he starts going out to Hogsmeade with someone who catches his eyes. I want to be there at his wedding and I want to do it all again with my grandchildren. I want to grow old and wrinkled and lament my hair turning grey with Petunia. Surely she can't stay mad at me forever.

I don't want to die. It's not fair. Please, I want to live.

Harry's breath catches. Like the steady turns of a clock, Voldemort's steps come closer to Lily.

His voice is inhumanly high and grating. "Stand aside you silly girl."

Harry's eyes are trained on his mother, he's seeing beyond the surface of her appearance. He doesn't even know if the words he is hearing are her thoughts or something deeper, something from her soul.

As if I would stand aside. I'm not a girl, not anymore. I'm a mother.

Her voice is desperate, "Take me instead."

I don't want to die, she's thinking. *I haven't had long enough. I've known my son not even two years. He can only say four words and three of them are about juice. He makes bubbles that look like snowflakes during bath time and they're beautiful, if not a little wonky. I wonder if he'll be an artist one day when he's old enough. I want to see it. I want to see him grow up. I want to watch five dozen winters and make hot chocolate the muggle way because it works goddamnit.*

I don't want to die. I don't want Petunia to bury me.

But I want Harry to have a future. That's worth everything.

The monster speaks again. "Stand aside now."

Lily looks back in defiance. *You **will** take me instead.* Her voice is soft, "I won't."

Voldemort raises his wand. Harry hears a scream. As the monster begins to say the words of death, Lily's eyes land on where Harry, the Harry of this moment, is looking at the scene.

A green light flashes.

Her eyes fill with unbridled joy. " *You're alive. You lived."*

She falls.

From somewhere deep within him, he's filled with a sense of overflowing love and happiness.

It was worth everything.

He does not remember the words and still, he speaks.

"Expecto Patronum."

***

The room is bathed in dazzling silver light.

Chapter End Notes

Bahahaha Tom! Cursing women and then getting hugs from little girls. He's a bit conflicted in how he behaves, isn't he?

In the next chapter get excited about seeing Sirius Black, and Draco confronting Tom, and Christmas break.

Remember in chapter three when Harry talks about sometimes feeling emotions that weren't his own? That was foreshadowing for this moment. Soul sight will continue to be a thing, and Harry is going to get better at it. Trelawney has the comment in chapter 5. XD

Leave a comment, please, so I know that I am not writing into the void. Drop a kudos if you feel so inclined.

Also, if you like marvel, check out my new crossover fic Harry Potter and The Immortal's Playground

Named

Chapter Summary

Hermione doesn't like puzzles

Chapter Notes

Hello Folks! I hope y'all are staying safe out there. It's a scary world. An update that took a bit longer than expected, but will hopefully be worthwhile. Enjoy!

if you like marvel, check out my new crossover fic Harry Potter and The Immortal's Playground

(it will update this week if all goes to plan)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Shadows have always been something of a comfort to Harry. He grew up hiding from his uncle in the umbras between the identical houses of Privet Drive, and huddling beneath a flickering bulb in the shadows of his dingy cupboard. There's a kind of safety in darkness, one so very different and yet so very similar to the safety afforded by light.

When Harry looks out at the end of his wand and to the room beyond, he first notices the defined shadows. They dance and flicker in patterns of obsidian midnight, the chair legs' and tables' black silhouettes casting down the stone floor as waterfalls, the space between the cupboard and back wall shrouded the color of coal.

The brighter the light, the darker the shadow. I've always known that.

And the light is bright, that's what Harry sees second. Prancing about on thin air is something that looks like a doe, only she is so much larger than she has any right to be, larger than a bull maybe, but no less slender for it, silver hide glowing from within as though she has captured the moon in her belly.

But she cannot be a doe because she has antlers of spun gold, huge shining auriferous antlers, the sort that look like trees on the precipice of blossoming. Her antlers stand tall and proud and sprout boldly from her head. Her hooves are the color of the brass pocket watch Harry's seen once or twice in his family's vault and they make almost the same sound as she canters about, her steps sounding out a steady tick-tick like the hands of time.

She is stunning, the impossible doe, and warm in a way Harry cannot begin to fathom. In fact, Harry feels very much like he *is* the not-quite a doe, like his heart is beating in some faraway place and his bones are intangible, present but not part of the natural world.

The doe shakes her head on her journey about the office too small for her splendor, once, twice, before coming to rest in front of Harry's legs, head resting heavy (there, but not there) against his thigh.

His breaths are in time with hers, they blink in unison.

Professor Lupin's voice is too wondering, too joyous, for the occasion. "A Ceryneian Hind," he says with murmured adoration, "Sacred beasts of the goddess Artemis, a prophet of Heracles."

The words Harry means to say are stuck in his throat when he looks (but is it he who looks?) at Professor Lupin's scarred face. Affection so strong it would be startling if he could still notice such things rises within him and he only doesn't cup his professor's cheeks between his too small palms because he feels like that is not something he can do, but he wants, oh how he wants, to embrace the tired man before him.

"Harry," Professor Lupin says with real pride, "Patronuses of legends are exceedingly rare. I have never seen any Patronus with a color

other than silver, I did not know it was possible, and yet… yet you have commanded the impossible at just thirteen. You're a marvel."

The brighter the light, the darker the shadow.

It cannot be his voice that says, with a kind of desperate relief, "Remus."

Professor Lupin jolts and looks at Harry with startling intensity.

"Harry?"

And these, these are the words of a woman dead, and the words of a boy who *saw* her. She's not speaking but he's still feeling her deep in his marrow, in the place beyond himself and beyond herself, in the place where self and soul mean only that someone once lived.

He's crying. "Remus." It's not a repetition but a fantasy unfolding in reality. His voice is filled with something akin to joy. "You've gone grey around the edges, Rem." Harry takes a shuddering breath that fills lungs that are too far away to be his. "Getting older…it-- it-- suits you."

"Harry…" Professor Lupin says in a hoarse whisper, "that's not you, is it? Lily…"

Harry shakes his head like the Ceryneian Hind had earlier, as though trying to get water out of his ears. Who is he? Where does he end and she begin? Where is *he*?

Come on now, little soul traveler, the voice sounds so much like Tom, *let me bring back to your own two feet.*

The Ceryneian Hind paws at the ground and Harry blinks out of time with the creature of his soul, their breaths all at once out of sync. Harry sways on weak legs.

The Patronus dissipates in a cascade of silver and golden sparks and for one brilliant moment illuminates the room with fireworks of dazzling light, before disappearing without a trace and leaving behind a smattering of muted shadows.

Harry sinks to his knees, palms slapping on stone floors. He breathes deeply, cheeks damp with tears he can only vaguely remember crying.

"... Professor?" He asks, voice near-silent and raw with sadness.

Professor Lupin kneels down by Harry on the floor placing a firm hand on his shoulder. He carefully examines Harry from his head to his toes. "Harry?" His voice is hesitant, as though someone else could have been inside this young body, as though Harry was not alone.

The young Gryffindor stares into the professor's tawny eyes. He sees something there, a fear, a feral beast, a wolf, a moon, pain, death, his mother and his father and a rat and Sirius, the man who was Paddy, and a burning desire to be anything, anyone else.

Harry looks down at the floor. *Werewolf. Hates himself for it. Guilty for everything. I'm so sorry, Sirius. I should have done more for you.* Harry clenches his fist against the cold stone, remembering the searing agony of his first transformation when he was far too young, the snapping jaws --

The voice in his head this time comes much louder. ***Now, now, little traveler. Stay inside your own soul for a long while. This is getting out of hand.***

There's a pressure at his scar that almost hurts, and then his head is blissfully silent.

The words Harry eventually speaks are not the ones he wants, but they are still true. "I miss them," he whispers.

Professor Lupin seems to breathe a sigh of relief at Harry acting like… Harry. "Who, Harry?"

"My parents. I think… I think they were good people."

Professor Lupin smiles in a way too beaten down to hold joy. "The best." He settles next to Harry more comfortably, the two of them side by side on the unforgiving floor. "You know, James' Patronus was a stag. It had antlers, silver mind, but just like the ones on your Ceryneian Hind. And your mother's was a doe. So you are neither of them and both of them. Your Patronus is a legendary animal, a doe with antlers. You know, James always told me that you were going to be something special. At just eight-months-old, he held you up and said, 'he's got my hair and Lily's eyes, and just watch, he's our sum and he's going to be greater than both our parts.' And you know what Harry, I think he was right."

Harry wraps his arms around his legs and leans his head against the makeshift pillow of his appendages. "I never asked to be great," He says, "I never wanted to be, either."

Remus sighs, his exhale long and steady. “I think there was never any world where you could have been anything less than great, I’m sorry to say. It speaks well of you, however, that you also continue to be *good.*”

Harry nods dejectedly into his knees.

“And Harry,” Professor Lupin says, “There’s no need to come to my office next Thursday unless you’d like a cup of tea. I believe I can safely say you’ve mastered the Patronus far beyond anything I could hope to teach you.”

Harry uncurls himself and rises from the floor. He has many things he’d like to say, and many things that he cannot say, so he settles for, “Have biscuits and I’ll be there.”

***

Harry is not at all surprised that he cannot stomach much dinner, although it does seem to concern Hermione and Ron who both surreptitiously place bits of bread and pastries and easy to stomach items on his plate long after he’s full.

Tom is giving him a Look from across the hall at the Hufflepuff table but at the moment, Harry has bigger concerns. He can’t get his mother’s words out of his head any more than he can the feelings he got from Remus and the image of his Patronus.

And there’s a voice that talks to him in his mind, and that seems very bad.

“Hermione,” his words cut through her argument with the Weasley twins, (there are *ethics* you are violating, can’t you see? Children are not experiments!), and she immediately turns to him.

“Yes?”

“Em,” He studies the fluffy roll on his plate intently. “Do you think you could help me figure some things out tonight?”

Hermione beams. She loves being helpful and is always happiest when people need her. Harry often does. “Of course, I’d be happy to help.”

Ron pauses with his mouth full of Shepherd’s pie. “I’ll come too because everything is better when I’m around.”

It’s meant to be a joke, and Harry does smile, but then he says quite seriously, “That’s right. Everything is.”

The twins take advantage of Ron’s bashful mumbles to chorus, “Oh little Ronikins has achieved friendship at long last.”

Ron grumbles, “Oh sod off.”

The twins merely grin.

“Will Tom be coming?” Hermione asks. Her voice is carefully blank. She doesn’t particularly like Tom. Harry thinks it might because his existence is a puzzle to her, but the more she seems to figure out, the less she seems to like him.

She asked if he knew there was an award for a “Tom Marvolo Riddle” in the trophy room just yesterday to which Harry had said yes.

“Odd coincidence, isn’t it?” She’d remarked.

He forgets sometimes how smart she can be.

Hermione looks at him expectantly. Ah, right. He’d been asked if Tom was coming. “Um, no. My questions are a little about him, maybe?”

Hermione nods, satisfied. Ron seems pleased. (He’s never liked Tom, even if he now understands why Harry does.)

When the food is cleared, Tom ambles over to the Gryffindor table and lays a hand on Harry’s back, his thumb rubbing slow circles on the younger boy’s neck and palm splayed between his shoulder blades.

“You didn’t eat enough,” Tom says as a greeting. “Are you feeling well?”

Harry looks up and meets Tom’s dark grey eyes. “I’m alright. Patronus practice was rough. But I made one today.”

Tom smiles, proud. “See?” He asks in a teasing tone. “I said you’d be able to make one, didn’t I?”

Harry ducks his head. “You did.”

Tom seems to get a little somber. “You did manage it faster than I thought you would, though.” He pauses as though in serious thought before his face lightens. “Do you think you could summon one now?”

Ron and Hermione and the remaining Gryffindors all look on with interest.

“I’m not sure, but I can try.”

Ron says, “Only if you want to. No pressure.”

“Thanks, Ron,” Harry says, “but I want to give it another go.”

“Well go on then,” Tom encourages. “Let’s get a glimpse of your beautiful soul.” Harry flinches and Tom frowns, a question on his lips, but Harry’s tuning them all out.

There’s no boggart in the great hall. There’s the din of students packing up and the kind of sleepy content that comes with finishing a meal. Draco is staring at Tom from the Slytherin table. Hermione is soft and comforting at his side. Tom's breath is steady at his ear and sends goosebumps down his spine. The floating candles give the room a cheery glow. The night sky is ripe with constellations and the kind of mist that swirls around starlight like a curtain of gossamer fantasy.

It will be easier to make a Patronus here than it was against the cold in Lupin’s office. Harry closes his eyes. He remembers clearly Dudley holding his diary, awe in his eyes, sympathy written in his brows. He remembers the frenzy taps of pudgy fingers against thighs and the words, “I guess -- I guess I didn’t need two bedrooms.”

(It is enough.)

His voice is all his own this time, full of wonder and quiet content, “Expecto Patronum.”

He hears gasps around the room and can even see a glimmer from beneath his closed lids, but he does not open his eyes for a few moments. He allows himself to bask in the feeling of warmth spreading out from his chest and enveloping his body.

Tom’s sharp intake of breath is what finally causes him to open his eyes. His Ceryneian Hind is cantering around the great hall, resplendent in her hues of silver and gold.

Harry forgot that the teachers were still sitting at the head table, and he watches as they all observe Patronus with awe, shock, and in Snape’s case, forced disinterest.

Dumbledore makes eye contact with Harry, winks, and raises his glass.

Tom seems transfixed and as the Patronus disappears, he shakes himself and says, “Come on now, eat three more bites for me before they clear this away.”

After dinner, Harry says his farewells to Tom (who seems miffed to be told “no, I won’t sneak you into the Gryffindor common room tonight”) ("Well I could just bring you into the Hufflepuff rooms",) ("I said *no*",) and he and Hermione and Ron once again make their way into the third year’s boy dormitory of Gryffindor.

Hermione is all seriousness and wards his bed so that with the curtains closed, their voices won't carry.

"Nice one, 'Mione. When'd you learn that?" Ron asks.

Hermione sniffs. "I learned it from the glossary in Hogwarts: A History. There was a footnote about the spell in chapter fourteen on the limitation and augmentations of the school protections and so I looked it up in *Intermediate Stationary Self-Defense: the Power of Charms* by Osbert Salamin."

Ron lies down on Harry's bed. "Well, would you look at that? Hogwarts: A History is at it again. Making Granger's life easier since the first year of school."

Hermione settles herself into a crossed leg position. "You could always read it, you know."

Ron raises one brow. "Who's to say I haven't?"

Harry raises his hand. "Me. I'm pretty confident you have never gone past the first three pages."

"Traitor," Ron says.

Hermione ignores him and asks, "Harry, you said you needed some help?"

“Right,” Harry says, “Well, I guess, when I made my Patronus, I kind of saw my mum, and like heard her thoughts —"

Ron interrupts, “Like necromancy or soul sight?”

Harry pauses. “You know about that? It’s something Trewlawney said I have, but I didn’t really get until this afternoon.”

Hermione says, viciously, “She’s a hack,” even as Ron says, “the last known person to have known soul-sight was more than two centuries ago and the court painter for the French Wizard King, but it’s pretty famous.”

Hermione looks over at Ron sharply. “Are there books about it?”

“Loads,” Ron affirms, “I read a few when I was younger because it seemed like such a cool skill. Harry might really be a soul seer. We can just cross-check your experiences with Master LeFay’s. Was that what you needed to figure out: if you are you a soul seer?”

Harry says, “Not entirely. I also kind of got stuck in Lupin’s mind for a bit, and then I heard this voice that sounds a bit like Tom telling me to come back into my own head.”

Ron and Hermione exchange a glance. Hermione says, unsurprised but concerned, “... I have a few theories about that voice. I just need to see if they hold any water.”

And that doesn't sound ominous at all.

***

The next morning goes better than Harry has any reason to expect. He works off some of his stress during Quidditch practice and pushes himself so strongly even Alicia notices. ("Good work Potter, but maybe lay off a bit, yeah?") The feeling of weightlessness and becoming nothing more than someone searching for a glimmer of gold calms him like nothing else.

Flying is different than painting. His whole body is engaged. He's not making anything. He's becoming something. (He needs to have both.)

It is somehow unsurprising, therefore, that after his shower, he's called to Dumbledore's office. He grits his teeth against the agitated feeling burbling in his stomach and follows the portrait sent to summon him, a medieval bald man, to the headmaster's office.

"Password's 'Star Anise.'" It tells him.

"Thanks," Harry says. "Star Anise," he nods to the gargoyle and the door swings open. He ascends the stairs to Dumbledore's office and is surprised to see Tom already sitting down in one of two chairs across from Dumbledore's desk.

The headmaster looks positively joyful. "Ah, Harry. How good of you to join us."

Harry gingerly sits next to Tom who immediately grabs the younger's hand as though to comfort him.

“Yes,” Harry says slowly, “Why exactly am I here?”

Dumbledore steeples his fingers together on his desk. “What exactly do you know about Sirius Black?”

Tom’s body seems to relax and Harry frowns. “He was a murderer, right? Thirteen people killed. But he was also my dog for a while. I don’t understand the whole thing.”

Dumbledore’s eyes twinkle, radiant as stars. “He was not a murderer, it turns out. He was framed…” a story unfolds of friends and fathers and animagni and betrayal. The hatred he feels for Peter is so deep it burns.

Sirius has been exonerated, Dumbledore assures Harry, after the re-appearance of supposedly dead Peter Pettigrew and the extensive use of veritaserum. The whole thing is being kept under wraps for now, but the wizard rumor mill has the right idea of things. Fudge, the minister, is going to be doing a whole Christmas special with all the exonerated prisoners he finds in the interim.

“There are more?” Harry asks faintly.

Dumbledore sighs. “I’m afraid due process was foregone following the war. Fudge is trying to spin himself benevolent and to avoid any backlash, he’s being quite thorough about the whole thing. So far just one other innocent has survived incarceration.”

Tom says, “Survived?”

Dumbledore’s wrinkles belay his grief and for a moment he allows his

jovial facade to wane. “It seems that no less than three innocent individuals suffered and died from dementor exposure.” Dumbledore shudders. “Horrible things, dementors.” There’s a story there, hidden beneath the weak attempt at humor, just itching to be unlocked from its place behind Dumbledore’s polished veneer. Harry forces himself to look away.

You’re learning. Harry refuses to acknowledge the voice.

When the room lapses into silence, both Tom and the Headmaster eye Harry expectantly. Harry, still mulling the whole thing over, says what first comes to mind: “My Dad and his friends became Animagni because Lupin’s a werewolf, right? So they could keep him company during the full moon. And the reason why he couldn’t take care of me when Sirius was in Azkaban is that he’s a werewolf, right?”

Dumbledore blinks. “I wasn’t aware Professor Lupin divulged his greatest secret to you.”

Tom’s hand tightens on Harry’s. “You let a dark creature into a school with children?” He hisses.

Dumbledore is supremely unconcerned. “Professor Lupin is perfectly safe to be around.” He promises. “Professor Snape is seeing to that. Surely you do not begrudge an honest man an honest livelihood, Tom.”

“I begrudge the reckless endangerment of children, *Professor*.”

Dumbledore beams. “Well, that is a welcome surprise.” He looks mournfully down at an empty glass bowl on his desk. “I’m afraid I’m fresh out of sweets, but would either of you like some tea?”

Tom says, curt, “No.”

“I’m good, thanks," Harry says, "But, if Sirius is innocent, then —“

“Then can he become your guardian? Was that your question?” Harry nods. Dumbledore leans back in his chair. “As your godfather, he certainly can gain custody of you, Harry. But there's a reason why you are both here. Tom, as the last son of Black, Sirius *must* become your guardian. Harry, you have your aunt and uncle and no matter how much Sirius may want you, I can keep you from going to him. It’s your choice and so I recommend —“

“I want him. Sirius.” Harry interrupts. “Please.”

Dumbledore sighs. “Harry, I would counsel you not to make any rash decisions. This weekend Sirius has agreed to meet the two of you in a private room at the Hog’s Head as a sort of trial run. Don’t jump into anything too quickly. Family is precious.”

Tom’s hand cuts off Harry’s circulation from how tight the grip is, but Harry is grateful for the slight pain. “I said I want Sirius,” Harry repeats. “I’m happy to meet him before I go with him for the summers, but I don’t want — I can’t —“

Tom has mercy on Harry because the older boy says, “His muggle relatives did not particularly care for magic.” The way Tom delivers the words is bland, but the accusation in his undertone is easy to hear. Dumbledore does not flinch, but Harry can tell it’s a near thing.

“Right. Well,” Dumbledore clears his throat, “I suppose you’ll meet

him in Hogsmeade and we'll go from there. Many happy returns of family to you both."

"Thank you, Professor," Harry says.

Dumbledore looks at Harry with great fondness as he and Tom make their way out of the office. His voice is almost inaudible, "And congratulations, Mr. Potter, on your remarkable Patronus."

***

Things are looking up for Tom. He has *more* than he's ever had before. He and Cedric are changing the way Hufflepuffs are viewed through their sheer excellence, he and Beatrice are in an accords to do anything to keep Harry happy and healthy. (Although, Tom is sure that his concept of *anything* far exceeds Beatrice's conception of it.)

He and Snape have fallen into an uncomfortable position of begrudging mutual respect. As much as Tom resents the dour man for the favoritism toward his own house, he is far more agreeable than Slughorn, and admittedly a genius. Tom learned as much when he inquired about Wolfsbane — a purely intellectual question, he'd assured a paler than typical Snape — because Wolfsbane was new since the 1940s. New, in part, because of Snape's hand in its creation. Who, while being young, was also excellent. He was a bitter man, but a talented one.

(He'd been feeling like an inadequate protector of his artist ever since Harry managed his spectacular Patronus and Tom could only manage silver smoke. So, he spent one-afternoon pacing outside of an ornate door with carved forget-me-nots and then pushed his way through.

"Professor Sprout," he'd said after collecting his bearings, "Would you be able to help me learn to cast the Patronus charm?"

She hadn't even smiled and yet he could feel her happiness. "It would be my honor."

"Do you know anything about someone named Missy Damier, by the way?"

"Can't say I'm familiar. Now then, think back to some of your happiest moments.")

His main difficulties lie with Harry's friends. Ron is fiercely protective of Harry, and while Tom understands, he has yet to convince the Weasley that *Tom* is the opposite of a threat to Harry's safety.

Hermione, however, is more of a complexity with regards to how she approaches Tom. She had been enjoying his company and puzzling through challenging spell-work with him for the first few months of terms. He'd enjoyed their time together as well. She is excellent for her age.

And yet, something tangible shifted. She now eyes him with intensity, anxiety, and sometimes… fear. It's been so long since anyone has looked at him with that expression. (He finds he doesn't miss the cowering for all that he reveled in it decades ago. Well, he doesn't miss it when there's no reason for someone to find him frightening.)

Even so, he is finally getting what he's been owed since birth. He and Harry will be spending their summers with the wealthiest man in all of Wizarding Britain. No more orphanages and stolen quilts for him. *Things may just work out.*

Tom is dressed in his informal robes, soft satin and cherry embroidered collar, to make a good first impression on his "uncle" when he is pulled into an alcove by none other than Draco Malfoy.

The pureblood boy's hair is perfectly coiffed but his face is red and his eyes are full of flint. He is shorter than Tom and is obliged to pull down on Tom's tie so that they can see eye-to-eye.

"You listen here," Draco says with a voice cold as ice, "I know you are not related to me and are nothing more than a fraud. And I will prove it and send you back to whatever hellhole you slithered out of, and you will never see Harry again."

He should not have mentioned separating Tom from Harry. Tom feels familiar anger, cold and deadly, take root in his chest. It's been a long time since he's felt this way. Too bad for poor Malfoy.

In a smooth motion, Tom twists out of Draco's hold and pins the younger boy against the wall of the alcove with his forearm. He leans down to Draco's ears, wrinkling his nose against the expensive cologne scent. Harry smells of parchment, ink, treacle, and fresh pine. Draco's scent is cloying and distasteful, just like the boy himself.

Still, his breath ghosts along the hollow of the Slytherin's throat. "No," Tom says voice like flowing silk, "You listen here, Malfoy. You were raised by aristocrats. I was raised by serpents. Compared to me," Tom pushes Draco down until the boy crashes to his knees and binds him there with an immobilizing curse, "You are nothing." He wordlessly summons Draco's wand and twirls it in his fingers. Draco watches with eyes full of anger and genuine fear. *Good.* When fear serves a purpose, Tom supposes, he can still see the appeal.

“I am a son of House Black,” Tom says, “And the next time you doubt me,” he conjures a ball of fire in his hand, “Your wand won’t be the only thing to burn.”

Draco flinches as much as he can within the confines of the curse and Tom drops the boy’s wand. It clatters on the floor and begins to roll into the hall. Tom jerks his head toward the direction of the object. “Go and get it, cousin.” He smirks, “*Fetch*.”

Draco's glare is about as threatening's as a ferret's chitter. Tom saunters away.

He doesn’t release the curse on the pureblood until Tom is already down the hall and waiting for Harry to come join him for their Hogsmeade outing. When Harry does find Tom, his little artist is wearing a soft green sweater and fitted muggle jeans. His hair is windswept and his eyes are wide and glittering.

Adorable. As if we could ever be pulled apart.

As soon as Harry is within distance, he pulls the younger boy into a tight embrace, folding all around him and inhaling the familiar scent. *You still have him.*

Harry’s arms come up to clasp Tom’s back and Tom sighs in relief, melting into the hug. Harry’s voice comes out muffled. “Are you alright?”

No. I may have just alienated a noble heir. And he threatened to take you from me. “Better now,” is what he offers instead. Regretfully, he pulls back but moves one arm to wrap around Harry’s shoulders as they begin their walk to the village. “I believe we have a godfather to meet.”

***

The Hog's Head is as distasteful as ever, the patronage the sort of people that have Tom gripping his wand and half hiding Harry behind his taller frame. He spots two vampires that train their eery eyes on Harry's slender neck and he gives them both a predatory grin so out of place on the countenance of a teenage wizard.

They avert their eyes. The private room Harry and Tom enter is no better than the rest of the pub in terms of cleanliness, indeed the whole place seems to be falling apart at the seams, but it is isolated and quiet, and the table and chairs within the small space seem sturdy enough.

Sirius is seated at the table in the center of the room, leisurely flipping through a think booklet, when Harry and Tom come into the small room. He looks so different from how he appeared when Tom forced him into the mind-altering blood ritual. He was all bones and ratty hair then.

Now, his hair has a healthy shine and the black tresses are smoothed down and tied in a handsome ponytail. His beard is long gone and his perfectly tailored robe shows off his newfound muscles and strengthening frame. He's handsome, Tom realizes with a start, and looks the part of a pureblood lord for all of his sordid history.

When Sirius notices Harry and Tom — and it does take him a minute to do so — he immediately stands. "Harry! Tom! It's, well, it's so nice to meet you both. In-person. Not as a dog." The cheerful tone falls flat.

He may look the part, but he doesn't act it.

Harry glances at the floor. “It’s not a problem,” he mutters, “I understand.”

Sirius winces. “If I hadn’t been on the run, I’d have told you earlier, Harry, promise. I didn’t really mean to betray your confidence by pretending to be a dog. I just wanted to keep you safe and dementors… they can addle your brain.” Sirius sends Tom a look as he says this, before turning back to Harry.

“Well take a seat, why don’t you?” Harry does and Tom settles in next to his artist. Sirius follows suit. They are all silent until Sirius clears his throat.

“Do you want anything? Either of you? A favorite drink? There’s so much I don’t know…”

Harry says, “Butterbeer’s good if it’s not too much trouble.”

Sirius waves a dismissive hand. “Nothing’s ever too much trouble for my godson or nephew. That’s the first rule at casa de Sirius.”

Harry’s entire face changes and lights up. He looks at Sirius first with disbelief and then like he hung the moon. And then Harry says, in a tone that he’s never used before, “Well then, I’ll have a butterbeer *even* if it is too much trouble.” As soon as Harry says it, he blushes, but he holds his ground.

Sirius laughs in a way that is just on the edge of unhinged and ruffles Harry’s hair. “See, he’s leaning already.” He looks at Tom with an unfathomable expression. “Anything for you, Tom?”

Tom considers. “Some fruit, if they have any.”

Sirius grins. “Abe’ll get anything for the right price.” Sirius hollers, “Lucinda,” and a buxom young woman saunters in with sassy hips.

“You called?” She asks, unimpressed.

“I’d like two butterbeers and some fruit,” Sirius says.

“There’s no fruit on the menu,” Lucinda responds.

“Even for ten galleons?” Sirius asks.

Lucinda narrows her eyes. “Fifteen.”

Sirius throws 20 gold coins at her which she catches. “Get yourself something too.”

Lucinda rolls her eyes and walks out, but her smile is still visible even in profile view.

Harry seems to be unsure of how to proceed, especially since this is the first time he’s ever seen a display of wealth… *but get used to it, sweetheart. I’ll make sure you’re never hungry another day in your life.*

Tom decides to get the ball rolling. “So you’d like us to stay with you for summer hols?” He asks Sirius.

The man looks sheepish. “I was hoping for Christmas too, if that’s alright.”

Harry seems to be almost vibrating with happiness. “More than alright,” he says, “Never celebrated Christmas before.”

Sirius’s eyes narrow. “No?”

Oblivious, Harry repeats, “No.”

Lucinda returns with the butterbeers and a selection of melon cubes. “For you,” she greets Sirius, and then promptly leaves.

Harry takes a sip of his butterbeer and Tom pushes a melon cube at him. “You need more fruit,” he says, “have one.”

Harry looks at Sirius with a hint of embarrassment but clearly wanting to avoid causing a scene, takes the offered melon cube.

Tom smiles, “Thank you, Harry.”

Sirius watches the exchange intently. “Say, Harry,” he asks, “Do you play Quidditch?”

And like that, the dams are opened and Harry and Sirius talk back and forth rapid-fire, building off one another and going on many twists and turns.

Tom adds something every now and again and makes Harry eat half the fruit.

When Harry and Tom need to head back to Hogwarts, Sirius gives Tom a firm handshake and Harry a tight hug.

“I’ll see you in just two weeks when you come home.”

Harry looks at Tom and leans into his aside. Voice joyful, he murmurs, “Home. I just got a home.”

Yes, Tom decides, the ritual was worthwhile.

***

When Harry and Tom arrive back at the castle, most of the students have already returned to their dorms. Hermione is waiting by the staircases.

“Tom,” she says, “Can I talk to you for a moment?”

Harry says, “Everything okay?”

Hermione nods. “Everything’s great, Harry. I just need some help on an arithmancy assignment.”

That’s a lie if ever Tom’s heard one. Hermione is a prodigy with

arithmancy.

Harry nods and gives Hermione a quick hug and then kisses Tom on the cheek before going up to the dorms.

Hermione gives him a chilling look and demands, “follow me.”

Tom says, bemused, “lead the way.”

He follows Hermione with growing confusion (and concern) as she leads him up three flights of stairs and to the trophy room. She proceeds to ward the door extensively. She wanders to one corner of the room near the glass case with all the awards and turns as if to read one.

“You were sloppy,” she tells him, voice carrying no emotion over the still room’s air.

“Was I?” He asks, adopting the tone he used in that first meeting with Harry, “How so?”

Hermione has her back to him. *Stupid, if she thinks me an enemy.* She’s looking rather intently now at one of the plaques.

“You got an award for special services to the school in 1943. There’s no picture here, but the timing checks out. If you were a bit more thorough, you would have removed it. But you forgot about it, didn’t you?”

Tom considers, walks to Hermione, and pretends to look over her shoulder to read the inscription. “Tom Marvolo Riddle,” he muses, “Do you think he was my father? He’d have been eleven when my mother graduated but there are worse age differences, I suppose. Perhaps that’s why someone from the house of Black would name her heir something mundane as Tom.”

Hermione turns around suddenly and her eyes are full of fury and not a small amount of fear. But her hair… her hair is electrified with sheer power and her chin is set. She looks like the lion she undoubtedly is… *such a brave little Gryffindor.*

“Oh give me some respect, Tom.” She demands, “It’s not as if I’m a half-wit. You can give up now. I know you aren’t from the House of Black any more than Myrtle was, who you *killed*.”

Tom takes an abrupt step back, memories rushing in of the crying Ravenclaw's accidental death and the ritual (I can *use* this, it's alright) and the blankness of the diary.

“Oh yes,” Hermione says darkly, “I know about the chamber. The clues have been left for decades and it didn’t take too long to figure them out once I started talking to Ginny. She went to a mind healer you know. Mrs. Weasley thought she’d been cursed by a dark object. But you probably possessed her through the diary and had her write in rooster blood on the walls.”

“Oh come off it,” Tom says, “It’s not funny, ‘Mione. That diary was just Harry’s drawing journal. Surely you saw that.”

Hermione gives him a glare and yells, “You come off it!”

In the silence that follows, she breathes and resets, visibly restraining her childish response even though she is still very much a child, just thirteen. Brilliant, but young. It is a small comfort.

“Are you alright?” He asks, faux concerned.

“No,” she says, voice breaking, “No I’m not. Because I looked into you Tom and I learned and I studied and I thought long and hard about that diary. You were trapped for *fifty* years and suddenly got out because Harry drew you? There’s no magic for that.”

“That’s because it didn’t happen,” Tom stresses.

Hermione ignores him, “There’s no magic for that… unless you did something unspeakable.”

Tom’s mind goes white. *She couldn’t have figured it out.*

“I bought a book in Knockturn alley. It took a good while to find a copy. Brewed polyjuice myself to get it.” *No.* “Herpo's Magik Most Foul.” *NO.*

“You’re a Horcrux, Tom Marvolo Riddle, aren’t you? You and I both know whose.”

She spells out his name in shining lights “*Tom Marvolo Riddle”* and rearranges them to say “*I am Lord Voldemort.”* Her eyes are heavy with accusation. “Not a very clever anagram. You could have done better.”

He stares at her about to raise his wand, not sure what his next spell is

but knowing that it must be done, that he can't lose her because then he'll lose his artist and then… but her face softens into something he recognizes as the look she has when she's been given a particularly difficult puzzle. The accusation gives way to something betrayed and anguished. His hand stalls. Her next words feel like daggers in his chest.

"The problem," she says, "is I think Harry might be one too."

Chapter End Notes

A pick of a Ceryneian Hind:

A deleted moment from the chapter:

A small being wearing an embroidered pillowcase and looking an awful lot like Gollum from the Lord of the Rings pops into the room and fills the glass bowl with candies. "Ah, good man, Marls," Dumbledore says.

The creature, Marls, bows deeply. "You is being too kind," it says in a high, but still male voice. It cracks out of the room.

———-

So folks, we're real close to 6,000 Kudos and I am not above begging. Please, please, please, help a girl out? (or don't, I wouldn't want to pressure you.)

Please leave a comment so I know I am not writing into the void. I will respond to last chapter's comments soon, but I've left you all longer than normal without an update and thought that writing this chapter should take priority over comment returns. Just know that I read and value every comment I get, immensely. (*wink*)

Stay tuned for next chapter and learn about some rats. Oh, and the bomb Mione just dropped. But mostly rats.

Broken

Chapter Summary

Rats are the worst

Chapter Notes

Well hello folks. It's been a while, hasn't it? Hmm.

Thank you all for the best comments in the world and double thanks for getting me to 6k Kudos. Y'all came through and then some! You are the best.

I read every comment and they make my days. Thank you to everyone who leaves me one! I try to respond eventually but I promise I read them every single time.

PSA: if you like marvel, check out my new crossover fic Harry Potter and The Immortal's Playground

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harry is a Horcrux? It is a thought as horrifying as it is wonderful. (I am not alone.)

That a person so full of light is tainted with the deepest darkness feels like a lie… and yet, Tom feels his mind go to every moment where things with Harry seemed just a little bit off, all the moments where Harry was just a little *too* similar to Tom himself. Harry spoke in parseltongue, (*"I would not want that from you"*), back when Tom was trapped in the diary. At the time, he had thought it was just another sign of Harry's being meant for Tom, but now… it points to something more sinister.

There are other moments. How did Harry know to draw a broken yew wand in the courtyard of his inheritance? Was that intuition? A history lesson? Or was that piece of dilapidated monster corrupting his artist's mind, manipulating both Tom and Harry like a puppeteer and his marionettes?

If Harry were not wearing the Mind Guardians, Tom might be able to force his way into his boy's mind and uncover the depth of the Horcrux's influence on his treasure's psyche, but due to their protection, he cannot. They are unwittingly protecting a beast.

Unless… Tom wonders. Tom is Voldemort no longer. (Maybe he never was.) Three droplets of ink, a single tree, and a glimpse of unlimited potential were enough to make Tom diverge inexorably and permanently from the man he had undoubtedly once been and once became. He is no longer the kind of man who views everyone as collateral and unimportant. Even expendable, silly, flighty, infernal (traumatized) Ginny Weasley suddenly matters because she matters to Harry.

Before learning of Harry's beauty, Tom would have done anything for his own sake… but now he will do things for others. He will do things for *Harry* and expect nothing in return. All this changed from just three inkblots and a single tree drawn in black sketches. That first willow allowed Tom to see the world not only as a place of tragedy, which it most certainly is but also as a canvas for beauty.

If… and there is, Tom is almost certain, a Horcrux in Harry's soul… then that shard of Voldemort would have seen Harry grow up. It would have watched through Harry's eyes as a child with nothing but loss looked at a world built to break him and transformed it into something beautiful. It would have lived with Harry as the boy sat in a cupboard and sketched magic onto the back of discarded bits of paper only by the light of a flickering bulb.

And if that is so, there is a chance that the Horcrux inside Harry too has changed and is no longer Voldemort. Tom does not think it possible that any being could spend so long with Harry and remain hateful and unmoved, especially not someone who was once Tom.

So, the fact that Harry bears a Horcrux is not a pressing concern. Because if the Horcrux was going to hurt or possess or drain Harry, it likely would have done so already. That it has not done so speaks volumes.

Hermione, however, eyes burning and fists clenched with fear and determination, is a concern. Her red and gold trim robes are mirrored on the glass cases of the trophy room. Tom considers and remembers quite strongly that he once belonged to Slytherin.

Why should he get flustered like some Hufflepuff? He is a Hufflepuff, but he is not just a man of one house with one definition. He *chose* Harry and the badgers but Slytherin *chose* ***him*** . He is the heir of a legacy of ambition and cunning, even if his robes pay respect to his loyalty.

Hermione was able to find Herpo's book all on her own? Preposterous. There's more to this story than even Hermione seems to realize.

"I imagine that you didn't let the petrifications last year go unsolved even after they stopped," He says. "I respect that, I wouldn't have either."

Hermione nods once, slowly. "You're right. I already had them somewhat figured out, and then I talked to Binns and he was mostly useless but he gave me a good starting point to learn about the chamber, and then I looked into Slytherin's monster. It all checked out. A *basilisk* Tom? There's a basilisk beneath the school?"

Tom runs his fingers through his perfectly manicured hair and sighs. "Yes. But that's not really the question, is it?"

Hermione's jaw clenches. "It's not *not* a question. It's highly

concerning. You see that it's highly concerning, don't you?"

Tom gives her a shark-like grin. "Having a pet that will kill anyone with just a glare and obey only me? No, I don't see why that should be a problem."

Hermione shudders. "Checks and balances," she says, "If I'm going to work with you, we need checks and balances on everything about you that concerns me."

If I'm going to work with you. "Aren't I big, bad, scary, and evil? Wasn't that your whole making fun of my anagram bit? You won't work with someone like that, will you, Mrs. Follow-the-rules-Gryffindor?"

Hermione sinks down to the floor and draws her knees up to her chest. She looks somehow both older and younger this way. "But you're not evil," she whispers, "that's why I'm so confused. You should be. You shouldn't be able to be… thinking in the way you are. Not at all. I think -- because you didn't mean to kill Myrtle, the ritual was like an accident and -- you got to be more than just an object acting as a tether. You've changed. Harry pretty much told us the whole thing about the diary and I know he knows who you became even though Ron doesn't and Harry seems to have gotten over it. I think that's why he was so sad when he made the Malfoy painting."

Tom interrupts her musings by sliding down beside her, a meter of space between them, both their backs to the wall. "How do you know I didn't mean to kill Myrtle?"

"She remembers seeing yellow eyes before she died, and I don't feel like you would have had any reason to set your basilisk on an unpopular muggle-born third year. If you were trying to do a blood supremacy thing, it'd have been a popular muggle-born Gryffindor, I think. Older too, and probably male. So: an accident. It was, wasn't

it?"

He remembers it. The death, the anger and fear and guilt, and the necessity: *they can't close the school, I can't go back yet,* and his need to make something of it. *I can use this. What are the words? The words, the death, here's the diary. I'll use it. Waste not, want not. No need for apology.*

Waking up in the diary. The nothingness forever and ever. Yes, *yes*, it was an accident. Something went terribly wrong. "You're right," his voice is still smooth but breaking at the edges, "I didn't mean to kill her."

Hermione relaxes. "See, this is why we need checks and balances. So you don't accidentally kill anyone else. But from where I'm sitting, *you* haven't actually murdered anyone -- so -- I can work with you. For Harry."

Tom allows himself a private smile for Harry's smart friend before asking the question that's been bothering him, "Finding out about the basilisk is impressive no doubt, but easily possible. And Harry figured out who I was rather quickly, so I'm sure it was no great puzzle to a mind like yours," Hermione blushes, pleased, "but I do have a piece of your story that bothers me. How did you know to look for Horcruxes and Herpo's Magik Most Foul?"

"Oh, I didn't, not at first. But when I looked into soul-sight, I started looking into Soul magic which there's a lot of by the way, and then I realized that most of the books were really old, and weirdly Peeves saw me studying and told me to talk to the Bloody Baron to find better books and the Bloody Baron made the suggestion to look into Horcruxes after calling me a 'mediocre mudblood' which was really quite rude if you ask me. He might have felt bad about it though because I got the address of where to buy the book and an odd pile of old treasures from the castle to trade for the tome when I woke up one morning before a Hogsmeade weekend and a note signed 'Lady.' The

note even gave me instructions on how to get to Knockturn alley from Honedukes' floo. I imagine the 'Lady' title was the Bloody Baron's way of apologizing to me for calling me by a name that was in no way worthy of my dignity."

Tom remembers hearing about plans involving Lady Grey before the abomination in the world Above stopped talking to his soul trapped in the diary, and wonders. *Lady, hmm. How interesting that the ghosts seem to be getting involved.*

Hermione is still talking, "...and the book was horrid, truly horrid, but then I got to the bit about Horcruxes and it kind of made sense of how on earth you would have managed to be preserved for fifty years but it didn't make sense about how Harry could have gotten you out because you would have needed to drain his soul. Like how you were trying to kill Ginny. It wouldn't work unless of course he shared a bit of your soul already and he tethered you into the real world when you absorbed a bit of his… by absorbing his living artwork in the diary which he could have only made if the diary was a Horcrux. Then that would make sense. Except then that would mean that Harry would need to have been a Horcrux himself because otherwise you and he wouldn't have shared any soul at all. And at first, I thought I was wrong, except sometimes Harry loses himself and he says someone that sounds like you guides him back, and then… I think I found the horrific answer. That's how I figured it all out."

So I'm right. The Horcrux in Harry helps him. Not a concern at all. It's wonderful in its own way.

"That's really rather impressive," Tom offers, "and you're right, of course. About me, and probably Harry. But I'll tell you this, Hermione Jean Granger, the only way to destroy a Horcrux is to utterly destroy its container, and I will never allow you to hurt Harry, let alone destroy him."

Hermione stands and looks down at Tom with an almost begrudging

sort of respect. “And I’ll tell you this, Tom Marvolo Riddle, it’s because I believe you that I’ll let you stay.”

Stay where, he doesn’t ask. *With Harry? At Hogwarts?* It doesn’t matter. Loyalty, he’s learning can go beyond just Harry. Perhaps it’s because she cares for Harry, and perhaps it’s because she’s seen him, truly seen him for all he is, but he’d do a great deal for Hermione Jean Granger. He rises to his feet with the grace of a dancer and gives Hermione the kind of grin that used to make girls swoon. She does not seem much impressed, but she does seem friendlier somehow.

“Well then, Ms. Granger, I suppose you’d best get used to me because I feel like I’ll be around for a long while.” He extends a hand.

Hermione’s eyes go thoughtful and she reaches out her own hand and they shake. She says, voice half in her head and yet loud enough to be heard, “A good deal longer than you should have ever been able to be.”

They release each other and Hermione begins to undo the wards. Tom is about to leave when he says, “There is no should. In wandering and getting lost the dead are found and finding.”

And he leaves to the voice of a young girl murmuring, “And a riddle from a Riddle.”

But you’ll solve it, won’t you? Because like me, you’ll do anything for Harry.

***

Tom hasn't seen Harry for three days. He knows this is because Harry has been drawn into a painting Professor Badgerwood claims is so monumental, his artist has been excused from all classes other than potions. (The professors have all agreed that clearly Harry's gift is worthy of cultivation and are willing to bend the rules for him. Aside from one irate Pansy Parkinson, the student population seems to feel that getting to see Harry's work is worth the unequal treatment. Blaise Zabini, one of Malfoy's friends, was heard saying, "Hell, if I had an ounce of Potter's talent, I'd never go to class again. Imagine how much better he could become if he stopped practicing all of the magic he'll never use as an adult and just focused on art?" Theodore Nott, a far less romantic boy, had replied, "He still needs to know the basics just to be a well-rounded person.")

Snape, however, refuses to be a part of the "coddling of mediocre Harry Potter," and is twice as hard on the boy than he was before, which is saying quite a lot. Tom would hate Snape, but he appreciates how superior the man is to Slughorn and cannot quite muster the hatred he would normally feel for someone poor to Harry.

After a potions lesson in which Tom, for the fifth class in a row, brews a perfect potion and helps every Hufflepuff in his class get to at least an E with theirs, Snape asks Tom to spend the afternoon helping him skin dead dipsa. It is a task Tom finds most unpleasant due to his affinity for snakes, but he is utterly competent at it.

Snape watches Tom with an odd glint in his eyes and says in the silence of the room, "It is unfathomable to me that you did not end up in my house."

Tom smirks inwardly but adopts his most wide-eyed expression. "Why would you say that, sir?"

Snape's lip curls. "Oh, are we playing this game? Shall I pretend not to notice that you could outwit all my snakes combined and shall you pretend to be little more than an absurdly talented Hufflepuff?"

Tom laughs lightly. “I am little more than an absurdly talented Hufflepuff even if I am also able to outwit your snakes.”

Snape sighs. “If you had come to Hogwarts when you were eleven, you most certainly would have been in my house.”

Tom has a moment of fierce nostalgia remembering the Slytherin dorms and the ways his classmates traded secrets and favors as currency. He misses the politics and intrigue that clung to the common room with the same pervasiveness the scent of flowers in bloom clings to the fabric of the air in the Hufflepuff space.

But Snape, for all that he is more tolerable than Slughorn, is still a Slytherin. Like Tom was. Which means the man is playing a game. And for some reason, Tom has become a piece on his chessboard (or perhaps a player.) So Tom will act the part of a Slytherin and give out nothing for free.

“If I had come here when I was eleven,” Tom says, “I reckon I would have gone to Ravenclaw.”

It is a patent lie. From the way Snape’s eyes seem amused and annoyed, the professor knows this as well.

“The ghosts don’t like you,” Snape remarks nonchalantly.

Tom cleans the knife methodically and begins packing up. “Funny, that. I don’t much care for them either.”

Snape looks over at the dipsa skins. “Masterful technique, as always. A tad old-fashioned, but I suppose you were taught by an old woman from an ancient house.”

Does he know? If Hermione could figure it out, chances are he could too. But the only way he’ll know for certain is if I give him some confirmation. Like I gave her. Like I gave Harry. And I won’t give that to Snape.

“Mother was very proud of her traditions.”

Tom leaves the classroom after a polite nod and equally polite dismissal and pretends not to notice the way he is suddenly aware of the fact that the ghosts seem to intentionally herd younger students away from his path.

Lady Grey. Hmm. What are you doing and what did He (I) do to you?

He winds his way to the art room, ignoring the way Peeves grabs a small child away from him as he walks, and enters into the art studio as the winter sun is setting against a dark afternoon sky.

Harry is in his corner, eyes hazy and unfocused the way they often get when he is in the midst of creation. His robes lie abandoned in a clump on the floor by his station and his oversized grey clothes are streaked in paint. In fact, his arms and hands are covered in pigment all the way up to his elbows.

The painting seems to be completed though if the way Harry is sitting back on his heels is any indication.

The entire class is seated behind him in a small semi-circle looking at

his newest creation.

Tom stands behind them and looks at the canvas. His breath catches. *Harry.*

***

Harry's spent the last few days in an almost feverish state. The feel of creation was itching and once the idea took root he needed to paint it before he could move on. The sense of completion sits like a satisfying meal warm and comforting deep in his belly.

He sits back on his heels and allows himself a moment to wonder at what he's made.

The canvas is large, the size of a handsome window. One half of the painting is illuminated by the luminescent rays of a full moon. Bright stars are seen in glimpses through textured trees in a forest of frozen wood and falling snow. Shadows stretch toward him on the ground, flickering and growing darker and lighter in every second.

Prancing through the frozen nighttime is a doe made entirely of what looks to be silver moonlight, her hoofs silent in the snow and leaving heavy footprints in the powder.

The other half of the canvas is illuminated by the bright sun. Sakura trees stretch toward the sky, rooted in green grass that smells of damp earth, the pink trees lining a path that points to golden sun. Hints of blue can be seen from the gaps between the blossoms. Petals drift down slowly in the wind, looking for all the world like pink snow. The blushing flowers coat the ground and are bathed in a halo of light. And in between the trees, cantering up and down the pathway, is a strong and bold silver stag, footfalls leaving indents in the fallen

cherry blossoms.

Every so often, the antlers of the stag will cross over to the winter as the doe's front hoof edges into the spring and they will nuzzle one another.

And between the winter and the spring, a shadow of a fawn runs with all the exuberance of a child in the beginning of life. The shadow leaves no footfalls but will be stroked and carried by the shadows of the doe and stag. It is as if the true world could not hold this family of three, and they only find each other in the places light cannot go.

Harry feels a body settle next to his and knows that it is Tom. When he feels calloused thumbs cup his cheeks, he knows that he must be crying.

"I saw my mother," He says. "She said it was worth everything." Other people may not understand what this means, but Tom does. Harry can't hope to explain what this means to him, what this painting means to him, but Tom will make sense of the mess in Harry's mind. From the gasps of the class behind him, some of them understand as well.

Tom tugs Harry forward into a hug. "She was right," he murmurs, "It was. It *was.* "

They stay like that for a moment before Professor Badgerwood clears his throat and Harry abruptly is reminded that he is not alone. He pulls away from Tom, runs a finger through his greasy hair, and says, "I'm kinda hungry."

Beatrice Badgerwood pushes a mug of butterbeer into his hands immediately. "Of course you are, you absolutely ridiculous child. You've barely eaten for three days."

And then come the congratulations of a work completed, and Professor Bagerwood's excited, "This will be perfect for your portfolio, those stuck-ups will see what Britain has to offer, they will," and the ill-concealed looks of confusion about him and Tom and why exactly they behave in the ways that they do.

(Not too many of those, though. People are slowly, impossibly, getting used to it. "Tom and Harry," they say, "It's a mystery. But that's just how they are. And Merlin knows they're both better for it.")

So when all is over, and the painting sent to be displayed in the great hall, Harry allows himself to be led back to the waiting Ron and Hermione at dinner, and Ron tells him he needs to shower, and Hermione says, "Thank you for getting him here, Tom," and Tom nods at her (when did they become so friendly?) and makes sure Harry gets enough to eat.

The whole dinner he is accosted by people congratulating him or attempting to ask him " *But what does it **mean** ?"*

The Weasley twins tell particularly gullible students, "it's clearly an exploration of the seasons of animal dung."

But the most surprising moment of dinner comes when Snape spends a solid fifteen minutes staring at the painting with dark eyes before walking to the Gryffindor table.

He glares at Tom in a way that can only be considered fond before he looks at Harry with something softer than Harry's ever seen.

"Mr. Potter," comes his silky voice, "Was this worth all the classes you

missed outside of my discipline?”

Harry feels his cheek grow hot but he will never back down on his creations, especially not to Snape.

“More than, to be honest, Professor. Thank you for asking.” His tone is cutting and overtly rude.

Snape’s expression does not change. “Ten points from Gryffindor for disrespect,” he says dispassionately, and just as Harry’s rising up to defend himself, Snape cuts in smoothly and remarks, “and should you ever find yourself in the midst of such a… project again, I am sure Ms. Granger can catch you up if you require a small break from daily lessons. Salazar knows she does so even the days you do attend my lessons.”

When he sweeps away, Neville says, “Who was that and what did he do with Snape?”

Tom runs his hands over Harry’s scar and for some reason it tingles. “It is hard to see the world through Harry’s eyes and remain unmoved.”

***

After a much-needed shower, Harry is sleeping soundly in his Gryffindor bed before something like an alarm starts blaring. He rubs his bleary eyes and sees Ron jumping out of bed. Neville and Seamus and Dean are all running toward the door.

“Come on,” Ron says, “This is an evacuation, no time to waste,” and pulls a half-asleep Harry out in just his trousers and socks and a half pulled on sweater. Ron's voice is panicked.

Harry runs and watches as all the Gryffindors congregate in the common room. Hermione sidles her way over to them. The prefects are directing the students into lines and leading everyone out quickly.

"What's going on?" Harry asks.

Ron says, "I don't know. But this alarm, it's the sound that's made when wards are activated to get students to safety. Mum has something similar at home."

Hermione says, "It's the warning bell ward. I read about it in *Hogwarts: A History*. It means nothing has gone wrong yet but students are in danger."

Percy Weasley comes down the stairs with a few stragglers and leads them and Harry and the other third years down the corridors of Hogwarts. Harry sees through the windows that the sky is still dark as midnight and that the students are all in front of the carriages that bring them back to the train.

All the teachers are walking between the students, calming them down and talking to one another in furious whispers.

Harry notices the Weasley twins talking to Professor Lupin and Dumbledore. "What's up with that?" He asks Ron.

Percy overhears and says, "They had some information about something to do with a map that the teachers needed to learn about," he says self-importantly, "they're good for more than just jokes you know. They know all the secret passageways. Professor Lupin and Headmaster Dumbledore need to know all of them now as well

because Pettigrew's just escaped."

Ron goes pale. "Pettigrew? The man who was Scabbers and murdered thirteen muggles and betrayed Harry's parents Pettigrew? Death Eater Pettigrew?"

Percy looks a bit shaken himself and seems caught between remaining the put-together seventh year and comforting his younger brother. In the end, both win out, and he places a shaking hand on Ron's shoulder. "It will be alright. The professors will figure it out."

The Hufflepuffs arrive last and Tom immediately makes a beeline for Harry. He holds Harry at a distance, examining him thoroughly. "Are you alright?" He asks almost desperately.

"I'm fine," Harry says. "Just tired and confused."

Dumbledore casts a sonorous and his voice echoes. "Students, in the light of Peter Pettigrew's escape from Azkaban as of twenty minutes ago, we have decided to send you all home a day early for the winter holidays. You will remain at your homes for the spring semester as we update the Hogwarts wards to keep out Animagi. Do not worry, we will still be able to teach you all from afar. If you see a rat with a missing toe at any point during your time away, run and report it immediately to the Aurors. Come next year, Hogwarts will be able to keep out Peter Pettigrew and any other Animagi, but until then, keeping you all safe is our top priority. To change the wards of a school this size will take time, but we appreciate your patience. All your guardians have been notified and are waiting for you on the platform. All your luggage will be delivered to your homes soon."

Many cries meet the announcement and many students look to one another in fear. The most common thing said is, "I thought Sirius Black killed Peter Pettigrew?"

This means little to Harry because Remus Lupin comes up behind him and says, “Right on, well Harry and Tom, I’m to escort the two of you to Sirius myself. You’re both the biggest targets right now and we want to get you away from here as soon as possible. If you’ll come with me, I’m going to bring you to my office, show you a piece of paper, and then you’ll floo to your new home.”

Harry is now being lead through the castle a second time, still half-asleep.

Tom is saying, “So the house is under a Fidelius then?”

Remus says, “Indeed it is. Can’t be too careful. Not with Wormtail.”

“Wormtail, Professor?” Harry asks.

They enter the defense room. Lupin looks regretful and harried. “A story for another time.” He rummages in his desk for something.

“How did Peter Pettigrew escape?” Tom asks, voice chilled with anger.

“Same way Sirius did, I imagine,” Lupin says equally furious, “Turned into an Animagus and slipped through the bars. Fudge's career is surely done and maybe so is Azkaban. Dementors don’t seem to be doing too well at keeping people locked up, do they?”

“...No.” Tom agrees. “They do not.”

“Here we are,” Lupin says, holding up a piece of paper. “The house is Twelve Grimmauld place. See, Twelve Grimmauld place.”

Harry nods, bemused, and Tom asks, “Who is the secret keeper?”

Lupin smiles, proud. “That’s a secret.”

So Tom smirks and says, “Good for you, Mr. Werewolf.”

Lupin goes pale but shakes himself and says, “You boys need to go *now*. Step in the fire and say, ‘Grimmauld’ and there you’ll be.”

Harry nods and goes first grabbing a bit of green powder and shouting “Grimmauld,” as he steps into the fireplace.

He stumbles out in a dusty common space, disoriented. Tom comes behind him a moment longer.

Sirius is standing in the middle of the room looking at Harry and Tom. “Ah! You’re both here. Wonderful, wonderful.”

Harry looks around at his new home. It is worn-down to put it lightly, but Harry loves it.

There’s a beauty in the broken things. Harry wonders if everyone sees it, or if it’s something only children who grew up in the ruins of wonder can understand. He remembers noticing the jagged edges on a half shattered snow globe tossed in his cupboard when he was four -- a souvenir from France Dudley had destroyed in a tantrum -- and

watching as the flickering light reflected off a thousand minute glass daggers.

Harry was surrounded by broken things his whole life -- broken shoes were tossed in his cupboard, things that were too damaged to even earn Dudley's second bedroom were tossed in the cupboard… Harry was tossed in the cupboard. Maybe he learned to find beauty in broken things because he himself was a broken thing. And he wanted, maybe, to be beautiful.

There's nothing most people would classify as beautiful about the house he and Tom have entered by the fireplace. There are cobwebs on the walls and broken trinkets on every surface and a covering of dust so thick it seems to be a carpet all over the townhome. That the home has high ceilings and is clearly enormous are the only two things that can be said in its defense.

Sirius is rubbing a sheepish hand on the back of his neck. "Terrible place, really," he says, "but I needed to check something here and then it's one of the lesser-known properties and with all that's going on with Peter and you Harry, security is a priority. Once it's safe again, I'll take you both to the manor in Madrid. Far better than this dump. Just less warded too. Nothing a bit of money won't fix."

Tom seems to agree with the sentiment of this house being a dump… but Harry sees beauty everywhere. The beauty of the broken, Harry's learned, is twofold. Some things like the snowglobe of France, break out of the mundane when they shatter -- brokenness can turn a commonplace item extraordinary.

But the deeper beauty is that some broken things beg to be fixed, like that decapitated doll head Harry sewed back on a stuffed body with purple thread so that it looked like the doll was wearing an opulent royal scarf. There's a potential for new beginnings in every broken item and that capacity for metamorphosis is *beautiful*.

This house looks full of potential to gain a dazzling future. Harry gives Sirius a reassuring smile. “We can fix it up.”

He’s talking about the house. When Sirius says, “Together,” it doesn’t take soul sight to know the man is, at least in some respects, talking about himself.

Harry thinks of one of his first memories: sitting in a cupboard and holding a shoe with a split sole and using it as a toy to play with in heavy silence. He thinks of drawing a flame into the cupboard that doesn’t burn, doesn’t destroy, only turns a broken thing beautiful. He thinks of only being a shadow to his parent’s light and never getting the feel of an adult who loves him. He looks at Sirius, so desperate to connect, grieving, just like Harry, the death of two brave people who died more than a decade ago. He nods and his voice is strong. “Together.”

Chapter End Notes

> Thanks to everyone who is reading this story. We're gonna take a look at Petunia next chapter. Leave a comment so I know I am not writing into the void or drop a kudos if you feel so inclined.

Petunia Interlude

Chapter Notes

What's this? A new chapter less than 48 hours later?

This is going to be a very different chapter from the last ones. It is the first of the interludes, which will happen a few more times throughout the story. Dumbledore for sure will also be getting his interlude.

I hope you guys enjoy it because this is a different style than the rest of the story. If it's not your thing, it's not your thing, and the next chapter will be back to the regular.

But I think this adds something, so I hope you all feel that as well.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Petunia Evans can't remember a life before Lily. But she remembers her life after. Her long life after.

When Petunia was two and a half, she was rather certain of three things. One, that she was adorable and her parents loved her. Two, that she was the baby of the family. And three, that all this was about to change irrevocably because of the bundle in her father's arms.

Her first memory is one filled with jealousy. She is peering down at the little face peeking out from a swaddle of blankets and noticing that her baby sister has green eyes. Petunia does not have green eyes. Petunia's eyes are a pale sort of blue, the kind of blue that looks more like faded blue jeans than the ocean or sky.

But Lily has green eyes, the color of grass and emeralds and are full of that unnameable pull that practically screams, "there is something extra here," a secret sort of something lacking in Petunia. Lily's infant eyes are vivid in a way Petunia's eyes are not and will never be. Petunia will always wonder when she thinks back to this memory if

she knew even then that something would be different about Lily.

Petunia can never decide most days if she hates or loves Lily. She often sits squarely in both camps. Lily is an annoyingly charming toddler. All the fans Petunia acquired on account of being the only child in her generation of family abandon her for Lily. Lily effortlessly enamors those around her, first by babbling happily on her tummy and gurgling as she nurses, then by her carefully formed words with her child's tongue, and then by the way her red hair flies out in the wind as her short little legs race around the park.

Petunia's hair is yellow. It is not golden like the rising sun or vibrant like sunflower petals. Her hair is yellow like paper gone brittle with age. Her hair is almost white. Bleached. She's five years old and watching two-year-old Lily with her greener than jade eyes and rose-red hair and thinks, bitterly, *you got all the colors and there were none left for me.*

But Lily can also play with dolls when she is two and a half. She follows Petunia around like a lost duckling and is so happy, so infectiously (charmingly) happy whenever Petunia allows the two of them to spend time together.

So there are days Petunia loves Lily. There are days when Petunia wakes up early because Lily has climbed into her bed and Petunia lets her stay there until they need to get up for school. She spends dawns rocking her little sister back to sleep because even at three years old, Lily lived too fiercely and dreamed of terrible things. (She did all the living she could in the time she had.)

So Petunia allows Lily into her bed and gets her to go back to sleep by counting the freckles on her little sister's face. She always says, "And it's thirty-seven again today, Lils."

When Lily is four she asks one such morning, before Petunia can say what she always says, “Is it thirty-seven freckles again today, Tuney?”

And Petunia smooths down Lily’s red-red hair and says, “You got it, Lils, it’s thirty-seven again today.”

Lily snuggles down deeper under the covers and falls back to sleep in the passing few minutes they have before the clock will go off, and Petunia runs a hand over her pale, spotless cheeks and wonders where her freckles are. *You got all of those too.*

Lily is cuter at five than Petunia was at five, and she has far more friends than Petunia has even at seven. Petunia has two friends, neither of whom she particularly cares for, but Lily is gone more days than not at a playdate here and a playdate there, coming back excited and pleased and with stories and… then sometimes she wants to still play dolls with Petunia because, “I like them, but I *love* you Tuney,” and then Petunia hates her and loves her at the same time.

You got all the charm, Lily. There was none left for me.

As they grow up, Petunia starts to notice strange things happening around Lily. Lily gets down a milk carton far too heavy for her to hold with no difficulty. (Perhaps she’s just strong.)

Lily is seven and can fly off the swings in an impossible arc. Petunia tries once to do the same and breaks her wrist. Her parents tut, “What were you thinking, Petunia? You’re supposed to be the older sister.”

Lily can do it. Of course Lily can. Lily gets everything.

And when Lily is nine, her little something extra, the little something

extra Petunia lacks, gets a name. A foul-smelling boy dressed like a grim reaper calls it “magic,” and suddenly everything clicks into place.

You got all the magic, didn’t you Lily? Got all the magic and you’re going to leave me here, on my own, with nothing. You will, won’t you?

So while Lily goes off and about with the foul boy and spends two years in and out of both worlds, the one of magic and the one of real-life (which Petunia hopes to leave, thank you very little, she will go where her little sister goes because love her or hate her, Petunia protects her family,) Petunia studies about magic.

And when the letter comes “Hogwarts,” *a horrifying name,* Petunia watches all the undertakings of having a witch in the family with awe and concern. Her parents don’t seem to realize how this ends.

She remembers being thirteen and telling her mum, “We should ask Lily not to go. There’s a way these stories always end. They take the children to fairyland and then they steal their souls.”

Her mum will fold her in a big hug and say, “I know you wanted Lily to come to school with you, darling, but be proud of her, won’t you? She’s going to get to be around other people like her.”

People like her will never stop echoing in Petunia’s mind. The way her mother says it, it sounds like something wonderful to be the kind of person who dresses like a grim reaper and smells of decaying dreams. The way her mother says it, “people like her,” suggests that Petunia is not a person like Lily. And that she is lesser for it.

But Petunia has gone to Diagon Alley with her baby sister, and looked at all the shops, and seen wonder along with a good deal of things she

hopes to never see again, and she decides she is Lily's kind of person. She's a big sister, and big sisters teach their little sisters. It's what they do. She taught Lily how to count (thirty-seven again today,) and she taught Lily how to tie her shoes, and she'll be damned if she doesn't learn how to teach Lily magic.

I won't let a world of magic take me from you too.

She writes a polite letter to the world she hopes to enter. She gets one back. It is polite. It is strange. It is a *refusal.* And she watches with pursed lips as Lily and her green-green eyes and red-red hair board a train that Petunia will never ride to go live in a castle she will never be able to see.

You got to leave home, Lils. I had to stay.

Lily comes back in the summer with stories that sound like fairy tales because they are. She comes back with chocolate frogs that disgust Petunia to no end and huge numbers of presents because she's popular everywhere, and newfound bravery because, "I'm a Gryffindor, Tuney, can you believe it?"

And when Petunia tries to talk about how she's rather good with numbers, better than a bunch of the boys, "Dad just look at my marks," Dad is too busy talking with Lily about, "But what is arithmancy, really?" and Lily is saying, "Well it's sort of a kind of spell-derivation course. LIke examining the axiom of the will and the word in a mathematical kind of a way," and then Petunia turns to her mum, a woman with hair greying and skin sagging in that way it does sometimes and says, voice quiet, "Mum, did you hear me?"

And her mother will look at her, eyes sea-green, *more vivid than mine and you gave Lily all the color,* and say, "Was it something about arithmetic, dear? You met a boy in your class?"

And Petunia knows she could push back, but what would it mean in the face of *Arithmancy* and *Transfiguration* and the terrors of a place called *Azkaban*.

So what if she's good with numbers? Lily can do magic. Lily is charming. And Petunia is nothing like that. Lily gets to go back to school at the end of the summer. Petunia has to stay. Not just for the school year, but the rest of her life in this world that has nothing but uniform houses and the same kind of excitement.

So she says, fifteen years old and learning just how unfair the world is, "Yeah, mum. That's right. I met a boy in arithmetic."

And her mum smiles a true smile and says, "Well that's nice dear."

Lily's voice pipes up, "Are you happy Tuney?"

Petunia doesn't answer.

The next summer Lily comes home with a sense of need to prove herself because "my parents being muggles makes me no lesser than," and Petunia says, "If you feel like you need to prove yourself, you don't. You can always be judged fairly here, without magic."

But Lily won't hear of it. She studies and studies and does the same the next summer all over and then one night, when Petunia is sixteen and becoming a woman, and Lily is fourteen and still just a girl, Lily climbs into her older sister's bed shaking.

Petunia almost doesn't let her get under the covers, but she does after a long sigh, and curls around her shivering baby sister.

"Is it still thirty-seven again today, Tuney?" Lily whispers, as though afraid to break the quiet but needing the answer all the same.

"You got it," Petunia says, voice somehow breaking, "Thirty-seven freckles again."

They are silent for a long moment, the only sounds are muted crickets outside the window. Then Lily says, "I learned that witches live longer than muggles."

Petunia feels somewhat offended. "Oh?" She asks, voice chilly.

"They say I can live to 150 or more," Lily says, "And you'll likely live to 100 at the most." Petunia is about to push the girl out of her bed, *just another reason I'm lesser than you, is that it?* but then Lily says, "I've known you my whole life. What will I do for so long without you?"

And then Petunia can't help but smooth back Lily's red-red hair and press a kiss to her brow. "Lils," she says in a soft tone of voice she's hardly ever used in her life, "I'm the big sister. I'm supposed to die first. And when I go, you'll do what little sisters are supposed to do when their big sisters die. Live on, for me, and for yourself."

Lily, ever obstinate, says, "I don't know that I'll want to."

But Petunia thinks of how beautiful her little sister is, and all her friends, and her bravery, and says, "When I die, you won't be alone. You'll have a beautiful family and you'll be happy to live for them.

You will. I promise."

They fall asleep together that night and wake up in a tangle of limbs, too old to be sharing a bed but for one shining moment not caring at all.

When Petunia is seventeen she graduates and goes on to study accounting while taking care of her parents full time. Lily has an epic falling out with the foul boy and an epic falling in with one James Potter, a boy her parents love and Petunia detests in equal measure.

He is all swagger, all magic, *no sense at all,* and like the fairies in children's tales, she can just tell he will spirit Lily away -- all the way away to a grave.

But the two of them are so in love. Fifteen, and in love the kind of way Petunia knows she will never be.

You got that too, Lily.

So when they get married just two years later, right before Petunia's first day at her new firm, Petunia is not surprised.

When a woman named Alice is Lily's maid of honor, Petunia pretends the blow doesn't smart.

And she does her best not to be a bitch at her younger sister's wedding but she can't help blowing up at one moment and yelling, in front of a crowd, "You're seventeen years old! You're too young to be getting married! Far, far too young."

And Lily looks back, emerald eyes defiant, gorgeous in her gown the way little girls always dream of, (the way Petunia dreamed her baby sister would be, blushing and resplendent and magical in the way Petunia will never be,) and says, “I love him! And there’s a war on, Tuney. There’s a war. We have to live while we can.”

And then all the anger seeps right out of Petunia’s boney fame. “What?” She asks, “what war?”

Lily shakes her head. “Please,” she pleads, voice vulnerable, “Just let me be happy on my wedding day.”

James will forever (for four years) remember Petunia as the person who yelled at his bride at her wedding. But Lily will forever remember the way Petunia sat next to her when the party was over and tucked her against her side and the sound of her older sister’s voice as it said, “You looked beautiful tonight.”

And then Petunia learned about the war. Learned about the dark mark. Magic was scarier than it was dazzling.

“Come back,” she’d begged her little sister, “It’s not worth it. It’s not.” (I’m worth it. Don’t leave me.)

“I have to. Stay safe,” and Lily went back to where Petunia could not reach her. (I'm the older sister. I'm supposed to protect you.)

But life moves on. Burying down her worry somewhere deep, Petunia goes to work and does well. She meets Vernon at her firm. She’s an accountant for a drilling company and he does sales. Petunia is not an

ugly woman, but she is not beautiful. She's a bit too stuck-up and high maintenance for the way she looks and it takes her a long time to warm up to people. She is not normally attractive enough to be worth the effort.

Vernon is everything James Potter is not. He is filled out in all the places James is lanky, he is as non-magical as they come. He seems to find Petunia worthwhile as a woman. Perhaps this is because he is interesting to her for all the reasons he is dull to everyone else. He is so far out of the world Lily resides in that Petunia feels like, with him, she can live with both her feet firmly planted on the ground she's been granted.

They are married when Petunia is twenty-one, and it is the last time she sees Lily. Lily comes, a bit thinner than when Petunia had seen her last, and more skittish. "The war's getting worse," she says, "I don't know when I'll be able to see you again. Listen to me Petunia, if you ever hear about people dying with no symptoms in your neighborhood, no reason but they just stopped living and no one knows why, you run, okay? You run. And if you--"

The last thing Petunia can remember saying to her sister is, "For God's sake it's my wedding, Lily. Can you put aside that freakishness just once?"

Lily is silent the rest of the wedding and Petunia pretends not to notice her.

When she gets a letter from Lily that her little sister is pregnant, she doesn't reply that she is also pregnant, has been for a few months. She doesn't send a letter when Dudley is born and doesn't reply to the letter that tells her Lily's named her own son Harry. Vernon takes a special interest in labeling Lily and her family freaks. It may come from his own feelings of inadequacy when faced with those who so effortlessly have more.

And when Petunia's parents die, her father from a stroke and her mother from heartache three weeks later, Petunia handles the funerals on her own. Lily, she's told by a boy named Lupin who comes to see her all of one time, is in hiding. Petunia could not send letters even if she wanted to.

And that is when she decides she hates Lily for leaving her behind. She attends both her parents' funerals with a wailing six-month-old baby, dressed in all black and wishing she didn't feel so terribly alone.

Vernon tells her she should quit her job and she does. It's what housewives do.

And then… there is a baby on her doorstep. It's the middle of winter. Dudley's asleep upstairs. And there's a baby with bright green eyes and floppy black hair (so very unlike Vernon's carefully gelled locks) and that can only mean one thing.

Lily is gone.

Petunia doesn't remember that night or the next day. Vernon is upset and she thinks she argues to keep the baby and ignores him as he says, "good riddance," about her sister and the Potter family.

Petunia has flashes of a funeral with many multi-colored robed people and her sister's face colorless in death.

And then, it’s blank.

She starts having memories in full when Harry’s three and already living in the cupboard and Dudley is already spoiled beyond all control.

She can’t remember why she put Harry in the cupboard but she’s grateful that he’s there. She doesn't have to look at him when he’s in there.

His eyes are green in the way Lily’s were, he’s positively brimming with that unnameable pull that practically screams, “there is something extra here,” a secret sort of something lacking in Petunia, Vernon, and Dudley.

Aunt Petunia leaves him with the supplies in the coat closet underneath the stairs because she knows herself, and she is certainly not the kind of person to take in orphans and leave babies in cupboards, so she hopes that she will one day open the closet and see only cleaning supplies. She hopes desperately that this is all a bad dream.

I was supposed to die first. That’s what big sisters do.

And then maybe she tells herself that it is better that Harry is so far away from her Dudley, somewhere he can’t do anything bad, or make Dudley feel bad, or get swept up in that magic that looks beautiful but kills.

***

Petunia isn't sure why, twelve years after taking Harry in, she starts having nightmares. The nightmares feel so real, and they're not her nightmares. They're memories. Harry's, she thinks.

She falls asleep and dreams of the scent of pee, the sting of bleach, feels burns on child hands. She wakes up night after night with tears in her faded blue eyes, reaching for comfort only to find an indifferent Vernon. (He did not marry an emotional woman. That she should be growing some difficulties now in that regard is not his concern. He supports the house and that's quite enough.)

She finds herself doing housework throughout the day and day-dreaming about being too small for all the tasks and being forced to do them anyways. She feels this need to do them perfectly because maybe then, finally, she'll be loved.

And horrifyingly, the only time she feels even remotely safe are those few moments she goes to get more bleach or the vacuum from that cursed cupboard under the stairs.

As she dreams of Harry's childhood, guilt threatens to choke her and shame lies heavy at the base of her spine.

You'd never have treated a child this way, would you have Lily? Well too bad, you may have gotten everything else, but I got your son. Are you happy? I got your son and I couldn't even raise him right. I couldn't, I couldn't -- I can't even raise my own son right. You took all the good parenting and compassion and there was none left for me. You left, Lils. You left. You died.

Petunia finds herself looking through the cupboard and uncovers whole pages of scrap paper filled with pictures sketched with a child's hand. She sees secret gardens and dragons and a young girl with thirty-seven freckles on her face and fireflies all around. Petunia

doesn't know what comes over her, but she takes that graphite picture and goes to the store and has it framed and puts it on her bedside table. Vernon doesn't notice.

He's talented, Lily. That son of yours. Of course, he is. He's yours.

The nightmares continue and Petunia finds herself thinking about all the pieces of Harry she missed. He was funny, in a sarcastic kind of way. He was brilliant in the way Lily always was. He would have loved deeply if given the chance, she just knows.

She thinks back to when Harry got the letters to Hogwarts and she and Vernon and Dudley grabbed her nephew and ran. *Why did I let Vernon go crazy to keep the letters from reaching you, Harry?*

The answer comes easily: *Because I know that fairyland is beautiful but when you are spirited away you don't come back.*

She wakes up after a nightmare one night screaming like she is a child in need of a parent. She feels loss down to her bones, and says, crying, "I'm sorry, Harry, I'm so sorry. I wish -- I wish I could take it back." And she does, God, how she wishes she could take it all back. He was all she had left of Lily, he was her nephew, and she… she failed him.

She loved him. He's gone now too. (She's the last Evans.)

Vernon snores on.

And… the nightmares stop as suddenly as they started but Petunia almost wishes they would come back. They felt a fitting punishment for a decade filled with her greatest mistakes. Nothing will ever make

up for the abuse (and it was abuse, wasn't it) she inflicted on Harry.

But there's nothing she can do about it, so all she can do is move on. One step forward. Like she did when she buried her parents. Like she did when she buried her sister. She kept going. So she has to keep going now even when she knows she will never forgive herself.

She calls Dudley while he's away at his school and asks, intently, "Are you happy?"

He pauses in a rant as though unsure how to answer. Petunia never asks if he's happy. She asks about his friends so she can tell him how popular he is and then sends him chocolate. But Petunia doesn't want to do that anymore. She isn't Lily, never will be, but she wants to be more than everything Lily wasn't. She wants to be the kind of parent she's proud to be. (The kind of person Lily would be proud of.) "Yeah, mum," he says finally, "I'm happy. I've got a few really good friends and I've started boxing."

Petunia of three months ago would have said something like, "You'll be a champion for sure, Duddleykins. Let me know when you get the donuts I sent." Petunia instead thinks about the information he's given her. It's more honest than normal, 'a few good friends,' not 'hordes and hordes mum, they won't leave me alone.' Petunia smiles, a fragile thing, and winds her long fingers around the phone cord. "That's good, Dudley. I'm proud of you."

This is also something she never says. Dudley is silent again. When he speaks, his voice comes out a bit choked, "Yeah, mum. Thanks."

Later that day Petunia looks at her mantle and sees pictures upon pictures of Dudley. Harry doesn't appear once.

She spends the evening searching all over the house to try to find just one picture of her nephew.

Vernon gets home and says, “Pet? Where’s dinner?”

Petunia’s voice filters down from the attic where she’s looking through old photo albums. “I was thinking of take-away tonight, dear.”

Vernon calls out, “What are you doing up there?”

Petunia calls back, “Looking for pictures of Harry.”

Vernon’s voice is thunderous. “Why the devil would you do that, Pet?”

Petunia says, voice muted but audible even from the attic, “Because I’m his aunt.”

Vernon says later that night, during dinner, Indian take-away, “It’s good that freak’s gone. I hope he never comes back.”

Petunia curls her hand around her fork until her knuckles go white. Quietly, she says, “He’s still my sister’s son.”

Vernon leans back in his chair patting his heavy belly, and after burping says, “Well, she was a freak too.” Vernon clears his throat. “Remember Dudley’s tail? That’s what happens when you’re around people like them.”

“I remember,” Petunia says. And she does. But she also remembers putting a boy in a cupboard and the dark and swinging a frying pan, and she thinks that the tail was something Dudley’s forgotten but Harry’s likely never forgotten the lack of love.

So she looks at Vernon some more, and then she decides she needs a job.

She’d been an accountant, once, before she decided normal women stay at home and have their husbands work. Before Vernon told her that.

She spends a few mornings looking at advertisements and job-postings and by the end of the week is hired to do accounting at a local hospital.

Vernon tells her that she doesn’t have to work, and she says she wants to. She has a lot of things she wants to do.

She calls Dudley again to tell him she’s gotten a job. He says, immediately, “Are you happy, Mum?”

Petunia can’t remember the last time someone asked her that. It’s been a long time. Fingers wound around the cord, she replies, “I’m getting there, D.”

His voice comes back strong and she wonders when he started growing up, “I’m proud of you.”

She blinks back sudden tears. “Me too,” she admits.

Her house is oddly sterile for having raised two exceptional children and she finds herself disgusted with all the muted colors. She buys red and gold (yellow, really, but she doesn't have magic, sue her) pillows and decorates them in her house, remembering Lily's far away looks and half-dreamed remembrances of magic. (I'm a Gryffindor, Tuney.)

Vernon doesn't like them, doesn't like any of the new Petunia he's seeing. "It's not right," he tells her. She pays a gardener now to handle her roses, and she's too busy sometimes to know anything about what's going on in Mister Number five's house. It's not right, Vernon tells her. She's not being herself.

It's not right how she's been searching for a picture of Harry -- just one -- to prove she did raise him, at least for a little while. It's certainly not right that all of a sudden she's found pictures of Lily and cries over them most nights.

But how can she do anything else? She reminds him once again that, "She was my sister, Vernon. You still have Marge."

She looks at Lily so young and traces over Lily's nose and the freckles she used to count if she couldn't sleep and sometimes whispers through tears, "And it's thirty-seven again today, Lils," and she wishes something fierce that Lily could have gotten to know her own son.

She wishes that Lily had gotten to grow up beyond a young mother. She wishes and wishes and wishes that Lily wasn't dead. It isn't anger anymore that she feels when she looks down at her baby sister. Maybe it never was. Because beneath all that anger is just overwhelming grief and she cannot stand that Vernon tells her it isn't right. "It's right," she insists, "This is what happens when you let yourself love someone."

And it feels right to her, more right than she's felt in a long while. Maybe since she was thirteen and learned there was a world of magic that was going to take her sister away.

When Vernon lays divorce papers down on the kitchen table, Petunia feels only relief. "Alright," she says.

"Alright?" He demands, "That's it?"

If Petunia hadn't buried herself beneath grief and fear, she doubts their relationship would have made it this long. "I'll need to call Dudley to talk to him about this, of course," she adds.

When she calls him to explain her and Vernon's separation, Dudley is surprisingly alright with the developments. "You've changed, Mum," he says, voice oddly textured from over the phone.

Petunia almost flinches, but keeps her tone even, "In a bad way, Dudley?"

"No," he says, "in a good way. In a very good way." He pauses, and then: "Can I stay with you, after the divorce?"

She says, "Of course."

One of her few new friends at the hospital is married to a lawyer, and the lawyer helps her get all her affairs in order.

She keeps the house. She loses Vernon's income. She works overtime a

bit more often but buys her groceries just fine. She, with Dudley's request in court, gets primary custody.

Vernon will call her later, angry, for turning her son against him. "Only three weeks in the summer!" he'll boom, "I'll barely see him at all."

But Petunia will think of Vernon's too big trousers and how he encouraged Dudley to hit Harry with a large stick and think it's for the best.

She finds a picture, finally, of Harry when he's seven, eyes too large behind broken glasses, draped in clothes six sizes too big. Her children, she thinks, are born of excess and scarcity, one child six sizes too big and the other six sizes too small. And then she wonders when Harry became one of her children.

She looks at his green eyes and does not see the eyes of her too wishful sister, so much younger than she should be and so much older than she fears her nephew will ever grow. She sees Harry's eyes as belonging only to Harry, and she gets the picture framed and puts it on her mantle.

She asks Dudley for the post office box to send letters. He says, voice cracking from puberty as he gets older, "He'll like that. Letters from you."

Petunia looks out at her transformed house and asks, "You think so?"

And Dudley sounds so much like his grandfather for a moment, like Petunia's father, that she closes her eyes and lets herself feel proud for raising him even if she knows he turned out better than he should have and a good deal of that has to do with a green-eyed boy. Dudley

says, “I know so. That’s just the kind of person Harry is.”

You never looked at your cousin and thought that you were lacking, did you, Dudley? You’re so much stronger than I was. And you’re right. That’s just the kind of person Harry is.

So she sends Harry a small Christmas letter and a single candy. Change starts small, Petunia thinks. Change will never undo the past, she knows. She will live with a bit of shame for the rest of her life. But she has pictures of Harry and Lily in the house now. Dudley comes home for the winter holidays and she sends him to his room once when he’s being too arrogant for his own good.

He storms to his room and slams the door, and she hears him lock it behind him. She’s never punished him once in his whole life and he’s already fourteen. Petunia spends the night gnawing on her fingernails convinced he’ll contact the courts and ask to go live with Vernon.

In the morning, he brews tea and apologizes. That evening and every evening after, he helps her set the table at dinner and starts to tell her "thank you."

She sends Harry a letter for New Year’s and a present too, some clay for his clever hands. She’s glad that wherever he is, they’re treating him better than she was ever able.

But she looks around at her house, filled with red and gold, memories of the boy she should have loved when she had the chance, and thinks that this is how change starts. Small. With her shoes in sensible flats and her neck craning over numbers.

With smaller portions at dinners and discipline and expectations. Change starts small, she remembers, when she stares at Harry too

young and too frightened.

But change, she thinks, tracing over his spectacles in that awful picture of him on her mantel, his scarecrow figure next to Dudley imitating a beach ball, *change starts*.

***

The sky is dark overhead and the scent of mud hangs heavy in the air. Petunia is standing at a grave she hasn't visited for twelve years. She's looking at a stone and doesn't know for the life of her if it's raining or she's crying. It might be both. Her head is bowed.

She lays down a bunch of petunias on Lily's tombstone. It's fitting, she thinks, that she should leave some of herself with her little, baby, sister.

"You got everything," she says, "And sometimes I hated you for it. You got all the colors, and all the freckles, and all the charm and all the magic and all the true love. You might still be here if you hadn't gotten all the bravery too."

Petunia wipes a bit of imagined dust off the tombstone. It's grey and that's wrong because Lily was every color other than grey. "You got everything, Lils, except for life."

Petunia was never as vibrant as her little sister, never as charming, never filled with that unnamable something extra. Petunia didn't have Lily's magic or Lily's true love.

Petunia lives. That's what big sisters are supposed to do when their little sisters die. They live on for their beautiful baby sisters and do all the things their little sisters never got to do. They live on for themselves and put one step in front of the other knowing that the grief they feel will never fade but there's a whole world out there waiting.

So Petunia Evans, the last Evans from a family of four, the woman who buried her parents and little sister, keeps going. She has days where she is cruel and days where she is joyful, but she wakes up every morning and hopes that it's enough.

Petunia Evans does not remember life before Lily. But she remembers Lily forever in the life she lives after.

End of Part Two

Chapter End Notes

Well folks, hope y'all enjoyed that first interlude.

PSA: Are you an artist? Do you know an artist? Are you a not-artist who makes mediocre pieces because that's fun and who really gives a shit? If any of that sounds like you and any moments of this fic (painting or otherwise) have inspired you, send me your art to get featured. It occurs to me that this entire story is about art and yet there is no art anywhere. We can rectify that, you guys and me. Talent is not necessary. Credit will be given unless you want to be anonymous. Let's spam the world with a mixture of excellent and questionable art. (Or don't. But hey, if you have fanart you want to share with the world, send it

to maytal.w.booth@gmail.com)

Please leave a comment so I know I am not writing into the void. Drop a kudos if you feel so inclined.

Clockwork

Chapter Notes

Hello folks! It's been a while. This chapter ended up being a lot longer than I meant... so sorry? You're welcome?

Em. Anyways, 110K + readers??? Wut??? When I first started writing this I thought it would just be for my own two eyes and a few folks who were unbearably bored during the quarantine. So the view count is always a bit of a shock but I'll do my best to be worthy.

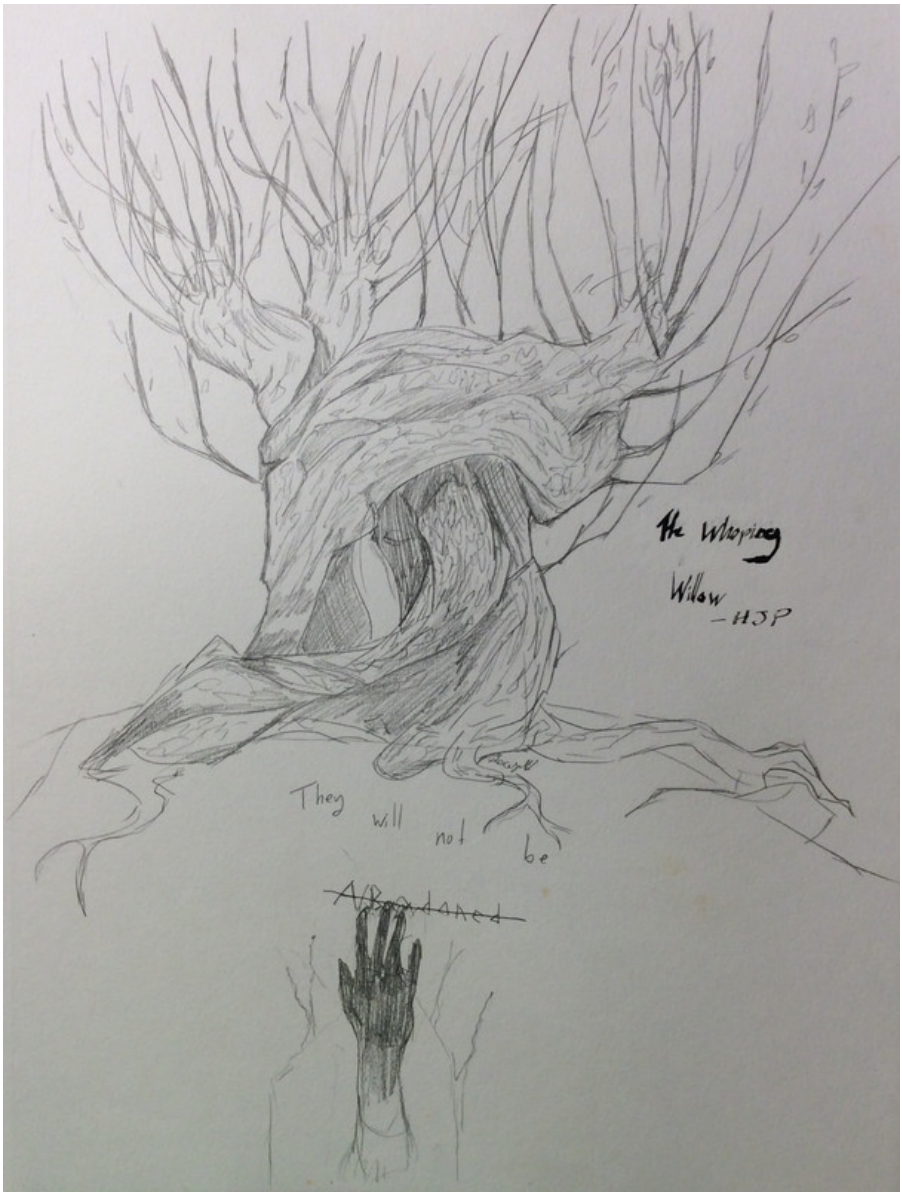
Anyways, I was shocked by how much all y'all liked the Petunia chapter. I was like, "No one will enjoy this" because I tend to hate interludes. But I just couldn't help myself and, dare I say it, it's been one of my best chapters yet.

Thanks to everyone and keep being awesome. Also: there is now glorious art for this glorious work. If you want to have your fanart featured, send it to maytal.w.booth@gmail.com.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Fanart

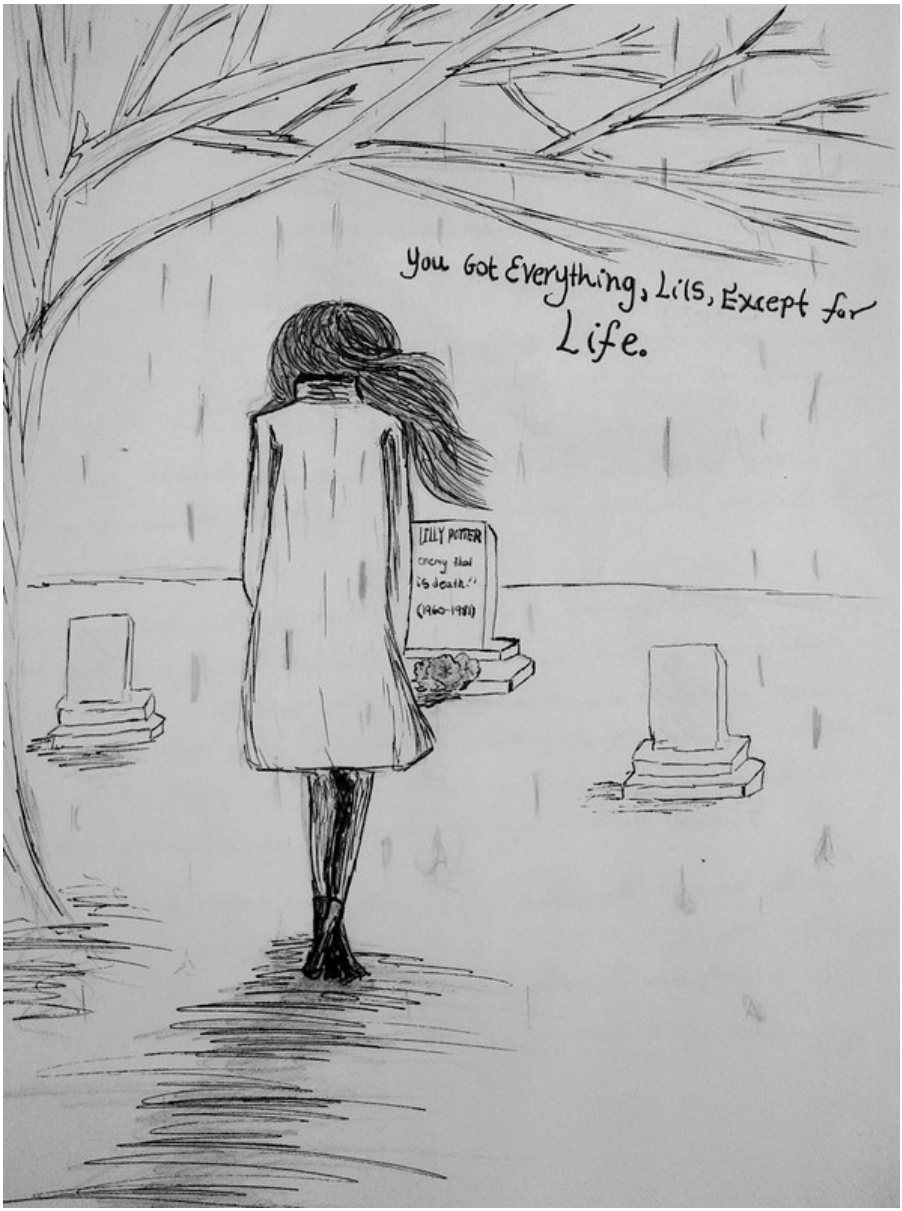
This beauty is by Derpydragan (Locus_Hocus)



Check out this beauty's artist on insta @sppech.anlkluysis

This beauty is made by AO3's very own ivysaturn

And this beauty's artist wanted to remain anonymous



And now: Back to the story

Sirius has a heart made of bronze clockwork. He's shiny, abrasive -- *loud* at times when he is announcing what he wants to do or how he feels. He's a clock counting down, always down.

(T-minus 730, and counting)

He's methodical in how he acts. Every morning at exactly six am he gets into a yelling match with Kreacher.

(House-elves are very peculiar creatures, Harry's decided. Tom and Sirius try to teach Harry what house-elves are all about and that "they don't have *feelings"* but Harry's rather sure Tom and Sirius are wrong in their assessment of the species. Hermione seems to agree with Harry but also doesn't particularly care for being around Kreacher because he calls her "stinky mudblood" if ever he must address her at all. Ron says Kreacher is "a right nutter. Never met an elf like him.")

It often goes something like this: Sirius thunders down the stairs after Kreacher's odd cries over how the house has gone to ruin wake him up. Sirius is a light sleeper these days and too scared to cast a silencing spell because, as he says one night to Harry, "Sometimes when I was in deep with dementor chill, it was like I would never hear any sound again. So I can't -- can't *not hear* anything again. I'd be back there even if I wasn't, do you understand?"

So Kreacher will wake Sirius up with his wailing and bemoaning and Sirius will thunder down the stairs and before he can begin to berate the elf, Kreacher will glare fiercely at the floor (because he still has too much respect to stare his *filthy master* in the eye) and say with what defiance he can muster, "Master is not being telling Kreacher *not* to be making loud noises this morning, filthy mudblood lover that he is. Oh, if mistress knew what is be going on in this house, oh how she'd cry..."

Sirius will say, "Bloody hell! *Mistress* isn't here, is she? Dear old mum is stuck screaming in her portrait and I'm your master now and I order you to stop this nonsense at once. And I say to make us a breakfast that we all like, none of that smelly cheese again, and then I want you to go up to your attic and do whatever it is you do and leave us the

hell alone."

Then Kreacher will say something like, "Oh, House Black is under such a foul, foul, boy," and then he will bow low to the ground, and say, "But Kreacher's master is filthy traitor master now, so Kreacher does as Kreacher is being told," and he'll putter off to make the worst breakfast he can make for the three of them and pointedly ignore Hermione if she shows up (which she often does.)

Sirius has little things he does like clockwork. He needs to meditate every afternoon at two and he needs to be draped in one too many robes at all times and have a fire burning in any room he visits. The fireplaces are why Hermione is over all the time.

Since Hogwarts is under ward renewal and additions to protect against the escaped Peter Pettigrew and any other unapproved animagi, all classes are taught at their assigned times through fireplace learning. Hermione is over for every school day because, "my house doesn't have nearly enough fireplaces but your house, Sirius, has sixteen fireplaces and that's just plenty."

Harry had asked at the beginning of the whole thing, "why would you need more than one fireplace? It's not as if you have to go to two classes at once."

(Hermione had gone a little pale and then said, "Two classes at once? What a perfectly ridiculous notion. Almost as ridiculous as having three at once. Hahahahaha" and then she'd mumbled something about chimneys and muggle "spare the air" pollution politics and pretended she wasn't acting the strangest she'd ever acted.)

Hermione never has a problem finding a fireplace that's burning because all sixteen fires are always burning. Sirius needs warmth and light.

And every night at eight pm, he drips a little bit (or a lot, but Harry's not one to call him out on it) of firewhisky into his tea and drinks it until his eyes go glassy. This is the time that Harry gets to hear all sorts of stories about his parents and their pranks and friendship. Sometimes, when Sirius drinks a little too much, he'll talk in halting words about his own little brother Regulus.

Tom and Harry will be sitting nestled on a couch somewhere or another, dust coating the cushions in a thin layer because the fixing up of such a large house takes time, and Sirius will be curled in an armchair with firelight casting jagged, knife-like patterns on his sharp cheeks.

Eyes looking somewhere far away, he'll curl one hand against the armrest and say, sleepily, "you remind me of him, Tom. You're far too somber for a little boy."

Tom will lean back and pull Harry with him until they're lying down together and ask, "Who, Sirius?"

"Regulus, of course," Sirius will snap, "Who else? It was always Regulus. Regulus was the one mum and dad wanted. Regulus was the one he-who-we're-all-too-fucking-scared-to-name wanted. But he died, didn't he? All branded like some slave."

Harry might try to say something but Tom will place a hand over his mouth and then Sirius' voice will break through the crackling of logs, his tone sad and slurring to announce, "I miss him sometimes. Doesn't that make me terrible? Sometimes I think I miss him as much as I miss James. I miss my brother the murderer just as much as I miss my brother who my murderer brother's master murdered. What a mess," and he'll hiccup, always just once, and say, "You remind me of them. Tom's just like Regulus and Harry's just like James and I'm just the same, aren't I? I've never grown up." If he's really, really, drunk, he'll

add, in a hoarse whisper, “Regulus and James never got to grow up either.”

There are nights that Harry and Tom need to bring Sirius drunk and near crying to his bed, there are nights that Sirius transforms into a large black dog until morning and sleeps in front of a fire, and there are nights Remus visits and deals with the drunk man on his own with the well-practiced hands of someone who’s been doing this for far longer than he should have been.

(Harry knows from the stories that Sirius started drinking at thirteen. When they heard that particular tale, Tom had given Harry a firm look and said, “You, darling, are still too young for firewhisky.” Harry had asked, cheeky, “Won’t I always be?” Tom said, “No, sweetheart, you will grow up. You’re doing it right now, even. I merely hope that you will always be too *smart.)*

Sirius never talks about his nights with Harry or Tom and in the morning, like clockwork, he’ll yell at Kreacher and be attentive and interested and vivacious.

He asks Harry about his lessons and teaches Black family secrets to Tom and takes the both of them flying (though Tom chooses to watch them fly around in the little pitch the townhouse has rather than participate more often than not) and Sirius delights in every moment he can spend around the both of them.

Right before Christmas, Molly Weasley and Sirius go and buy what must be the biggest evergreen tree Harry’s ever seen.

Classes are out and Hermione and Ron and the rest of the Weasleys come over. They make a day of decorating the tree.

Harry's been crafting a plan for a long time to get the house-elf to feel a bit better about things because Harry knows very well what it means to be a house-elf.

He finds Kreacher in the newly-cleaned kitchen and says, "Kreacher, I know you maybe don't like me very much, but I was wondering if you could please give me advice on something."

Kreacher looks up from where he is cutting the finger sandwiches Sirius ordered he make into very hard-to-hold pieces.

"Dirty half-blood master is asking for Kreacher's knowing of things?" He clarifies.

Harry nods unoffended at the title because it's hardly the worst thing he's been called. "That's right," he says, "I was wondering if you could give me your opinion on something because I think you know how things ought to go more than any of us."

Kreacher sniffs but is the least offended he's ever looked. "Kreacher can be of service."

Harry's spent the morning cutting out paper snowflakes and decorating them with gold or silver-flecked paint. He holds up two of the snowflakes. One is glowing softly like dying candlelight and the other sparkles in a thousand different places like a diamond. "Which is better to put on the tree do you think?"

Kreacher stares at both of them for a long time. Then he says, perhaps even surprising himself, "Oh, if Master Regulus were here, oh how he'd smile for these…" And then Kreacher shakes himself and says, "Master Potter should be putting both all over the tree, Kreacher thinks, but please is making a sparkle one to be going on the top."

Harry smiles softly at the elf. “Thanks, Kreacher, you're a big help.”

Kreacher blinks furiously and turns his head away. “All Kreacher is wanting to be is helpful,” he says quietly, and then he puts aside a small selection of the sandwiches he hasn’t yet hacked into terrible pieces and sets to artfully carving them into beautiful uniform squares. He looks at Harry conspiratorially and says, “these is being for you.”

Harry scratches the back of his neck, “That’s really nice, Kreacher. Em. They look good?”

Kreacher makes a dismissive grunting noise and gets a manic glint in his eyes. “Master Potter is being too thin, yes, Kreacher can see it now, Filthy Master is not doing a good job with the young master, oh no, but Kreacher can help, Kreacher can help like he helped young master Regulus. But Kreacher is making more finger foods for young master Potter so now young Master Potter needs to go back to the tree to pretty it, he does.”

Understanding the odd grammar to be a dismissal, Harry leaves the kitchen with a snowflake in either hand after saying a quick goodbye. He thinks as he decorates the tree with his cute little paper creations and laughs with Ron and Hermione and Sirius and Remus -- all of them in great moods -- how it’s too bad the two people who miss Regulus the most can’t seem to get along at all.

When the tree is shining and beautiful, the group of them settle in the cleanest great room and the adults drink mulled wine and do their best to eat the terribly presented sandwiches (Sirius yells at Kreacher again,) and Harry is delivered his own unique platter before the elf disappears.

“Blimey, Harry’s sandwiches are better than ours,” Fred and George crow. Percy looks up from a book for a grand total of one second before returning to its pages.

Remus raises a brow, “You’ve got the house-elf on your side, then?”

Tom, who’s been speaking in hushed tones with Hermione in the corner, looks over and says, “well, naturally. No one can hate Harry for long.”

Molly raises a glass and says, “I say a toast for that.”

Harry tries to smile but he thinks suddenly back to Christmas after Christmas in the cupboard and hearing celebrations from underneath the crack in the door. He remembers the smell of roasting ham and only the stale taste of day-old water to soothe his rumbling stomach.

No one can hate me for long? My relatives seemed to manage.

The Weasleys stay the night and of course, Ron and Harry share a room. Ron’s snores could be used in symphonies if only Harry had the talent of composition. Hermione’s family wants her back for the 25th so she has to go, but they’ve compromised (Hermione wrote no less than *seven* essays to argue her point) and she’ll be back for boxing day.

In the morning, Harry wakes up soft and sleepy and warmer than he should be for being alone in bed. (He and Tom often spend nights together, but this last night it was Ron and Harry in one room and Tom and the Weasley twins in another. Tom'd grumbled about it, but Harry can tell he has a soft spot for the red-headed menaces.)

He opens his eyes and blinks at the soft and silky comforter tucked invitingly around his body. This is not the old but serviceable quilt he'd gone to sleep with. There's a hint of magic that is not quite human around the edges, a subtle elven flair. *Aw, Kreacher, you do care.*

Ron's quilt remains the same. It's early still and Ron's snuffling in his sleep so Harry slips out of bed and wraps himself in last year's Weasley sweater and shuffles out into the hall and down the cold stone staircase.

Sirius is sitting on a couch in front of the tree in a bright red bathrobe and holding a mug in one hand.

A glance at the clock tells Harry it's half past six which means Sirius has already screamed at Kreacher this morning. He wonders what the argument du jour was.

Sirius looks at him and says, "Happy Christmas, Harry. Want to join me on the couch? Remus'll be up in a bit, I reckon."

Harry nods and walks over. He tucks himself next to Sirius and slides his cold toes under Sirius' warm legs. There's a casual kind of affection between them that's grown softly but no less strongly for its humble beginnings -- like the way even gentle breezes carry seeds to places they'll blossom.

"Is it just me or is the house cleaner this morning?" Harry asks. The fine layer of dust that's become a part of the tapestry of his new life with Sirius has all but vanished. The dirt-caked windows sparkle.

Sirius flushes. "Well, Kreacher had some words for me this morning about the dangers of raising young children in environments that can

hurt their delicate lungs."

Harry says, surprise coloring his tone, "So you cleaned all this up after he said that?"

"Oh no," Sirius replies, "I yelled at him that he knew nothing and especially not about raising any children, and then he looked at me like I was a rotting corpse and kept cleaning up the house like the feverish maniac he is."

"Kept cleaning up?" Harry asks. "What does that mean?"

"He woke me up this morning, six if you can believe it, by dusting the railings right outside my room because of course he did." Sirius sniffs, "it's not like I need sleep or anything."

"Do you reckon *he's* gotten any sleep though?"

Sirius wraps an arm around Harry's shoulders. "Eh, probably not, but it's Christmas and I'm with my godson and I just want to enjoy the moment. We have all the time in the world to talk about house-elves and why Kreacher and I will never get along, but a day like today comes only once a year."

Harry lets the thread go for the moment, relaxes into Sirius' side, and says, "I've never had a godfather with me for Christmas. 'S nice."

Sirius raises a brow. "It is nice. And correct if I'm wrong, but I thought I heard you say back in the Hog's Head you'd never celebrated Christmas at all."

Harry ducks his head. “No, well, the Durselys didn’t --” but he doesn’t finish the sentence and instead says, “but I’m here now, so it’s fine and well, I don’t -- I didn’t -- I never minded. It was fine.”

Sirius’ face is fond yet sad. “Hey, I get it.” The words ring with a truth that cuts far deeper than any he’s heard Sirius speak before. “Families are bloody awful sometimes.”

Harry says, thinking of the Weasleys, “Not always.”

Sirius gives him a squeeze and a wink, “No, Harry, not always. Now come on outside into the patio with me and let's have a good old-fashioned snowball fight.”

The snowball fight is categorically not “old-fashioned’ or at least not the kind of old-fashioned Harry’s used to. Sirius keeps using magic spells Harry doesn’t know to make catapults and heat-seeking snowballs that attack Harry with vicious accuracy.

Harry, for his part, is getting trashed. He gives up on making snowballs to retaliate again the onslaught and instead runs and tackles Sirius into the snow.

One of the snowballs that have been following him smashes into the side of Sirius’ head.

“Hey, that’s cheating,” Sirius complains.

“There’s no cheating when it comes to war,” Harry says.

“No,” Sirius says, thoughtfully, “there isn’t.” With a loud crack, Sirius disappears and reappears a few feet to the left of Harry and hits him with another snowball.

“Hey!” Harry exclaims, “What was that?”

“That,” Sirius says, sinking into a shallow bow, “was apparition. Wizard teleportation.”

“Can you teach me?”

“Normally, you’re not supposed to learn until you're much older and you need a license, but I won’t tell you if you won’t. We can start tomorrow. Remember this Harry, it’s always okay to run away when you’re in over your head.”

Harry nods with a hint of a smile then jumps up from the snow and races inside. He hears Sirius calling out, “Hey, where are you going???”

Harry calls out, “I’m in over my head so I’m running to get help!”

“ *Help?* Oh no you don’t!” Comes Sirius’ indignant voice.

Harry wakes up Ron and Tom and the twins and Ginny must have a sixth sense because she just appears but while he does that Sirius manages to enlist Molly and Arthur Weasley and Remus to his side. Percy ignores them all and chooses to sip luke-warm tea prepared by an anxious Kreacher who somehow manages to get Harry dressed in

six layers and says before he goes outside, “when young master Potter is getting cold, Kreacher is being in the kitchen with big mug of hot chocolate.”

Harry beams at Kreacher and says, one foot out the door, “Thanks Kreacher. You’re the best and happy Christmas,” and then he’s running into the fray, hearing the twins shout, “Nucklavee attack!”

Evidently, with Tom’s help, the Weasley twins have managed to charm some of the snow into a rather grotesque-looking ice horse that is running around and butting into the adults.

Ron, Ginny, and Harry make a wall of snow and cast shield charms (they can use wands within Grimmauld because of all the wards) to make a safe space to hide from the fight.

Harry and Tom make eye contact for a moment when snow is falling from the sky in gentle flakes and flying in projectiles all around them. Tom’s dark blue eyes are sparkling, his cheeks have a small flush, and he’s smiling wide and open and disbelieving.

Harry can’t say what he looks like but he knows how he feels: *happy*. It seems like the rest of the world falls away until it’s just him and Tom and the bright morning sky.

Harry doesn’t know how long they stand looking at each other, but the moment is broken when Sirius comes out of nowhere and literally jumps onto Tom’s back exclaiming, “got you now, little bugger,” and Tom says something undignified like, “geroff, get off me you buffoon,” and Sirius says, “Never, nephew-poo.”

No one wins the snowball fight (except, perhaps, Nucklavee the ice monster who decides to wander off into the winter landscape without

looking back.)

Fred and George say, “One of ours has never done that before,” and Tom is suspiciously silent.

When they’re all back inside from the fight, curled in front of one of the fireplaces and swaddled into oblivion, Harry holding a mug of hot chocolate in his hands, they bring up the very real issue of presents.

More appropriately, the Weasley children (even Percy) ransack the tree to find their presents, and Harry and Tom hang back and watch the proceedings. Sirius says, “you guys know you have presents too, right?”

Harry and Tom say, at the same time, “Right. Of course,” and spend a few more minutes looking out at the tree and wondering if this is what it means to be in a family.

So once the Weasleys are done, Harry and Tom go and see the packages with their names, touching every letter with a kind of tentative disbelief.

Harry sees an envelope with his name in clear and strict strokes that reminds him so strongly of Petunia’s careful writing. There’s something small wrapped and attached to the letter and it’s far less overwhelming than everything else.

He opens the envelope first and feels the room fade out as the words swim into focus.

Harry,

Happy Christmas. Or Happy Yule. I think I remember Lily saying once that some wizards celebrate Yule instead of Christmas. She told me though, "I won't. I'm going to still celebrate Christmas because I'm not ashamed of where I come from." She was always stubborn. So maybe I'll say Happy Christmas and Happy Yule because you come from two worlds and I don't think you should be ashamed of either of them.

I suppose you should know that Vernon and I got divorced. I work in accounting now.

I need you to know that if you ever need a place away from all the craziness, there's always a room waiting for you in this house.

I'm not ashamed of you, Harry. I sincerely hope you're happy wherever you are.

Love - Petunia

With clumsy fingers, he unwraps the small gift. It's just a single truffle only it's so much more than just candy. It's Dudley's favorite chocolate. The truffles are from a sweet shop in London that Vernon always has to make a special trip to buy. They come in sets of six and Dudley historically eats three boxes on his own before breakfast.

Harry asked every year until he was eight if he could try one. Petunia always said, "those are Dudley's," and Vernon always said, "Only little boys who deserve these get them, ungrateful brat. And you -- *you* will never be good enough."

Harry knows Petunia remembers Harry's questions and the answers he

received. Is the candy to say, “you’re mine as much as Dudley’s mine?” Is it to say, “You deserve these?” Is it to say, “You are good enough?”

Petunia’s heart is ink, dripping and drying and layered over in scratch marks and sketch marks as she tries to become the person she will be even as she can’t (won’t) ever leave the person she was behind.

He unwraps the candy and puts it in his mouth. It’s sweet, probably, and smooth but… Harry can’t taste it.

It’s everything, isn’t it? You’re saying I’m yours, and deserve this, and am good enough, aren’t you, Aunt Petunia?

Maybe it’s twelve years too late for her to decide that he’s her family but Harry knows enough of souls and forgiveness to say that this small thing is enough for him to imagine a future where he loves her. It’s enough for him to imagine a future where she loves *him,* a future where she thinks he’s good enough.

Maybe it’s never too late to love someone.

“Harry, mate, you good?” Ron’s hand is on his shoulder. “Something bad from your relatives?”

“No,” Harry says, voice shaking on the words, “It was a good thing. A very good thing.”

Tom crowds into his space, plucking the letter right out of Harry’s hands and giving it a cursory glance. His lips curl.

“Well,” he says voice tart, “it seems Petunia can grow a conscience after all.”

Harry knows with a kind of grounded certainty that this will be a moment he remembers forever. He will remember sitting at the base of this tree, Tom by his side, Ron’s hand on his shoulder, and the beginnings of family that wants him.

Harry is happy in a quiet way the rest of the day. He has little smiles creep up on his face when he eats his breakfast (porridge with honey and many fruits for young Master Potter, your second breakfast will have some meats because you are growing boy,) and cuddles into Tom’s side, and spends the day sketching in a book and laughing, and watches as the Weasley clan all retire early to bed and leave Tom, Sirius, and Remus alone in the living room.

Like clockwork, Sirius pours a bit of firewhisky in his tea (it’s eight, of course) and proceeds to get sloppy drunk. He slurs out, gesticulating wildly, “We celebre-it-ated Yule here in this fuck-feck-ing townhouse because we were -- was -- no, *were* proper purebloods. But my first Christmas was with James in his house and Ringley, that was James-ies -- James’ house elf -- he dint get one tree for the great room, no! Ringley got a tree for every room in the manor, even the bathrooms, because he didn’t know any better!” Sirius does an odd hiccuping kind of a laugh, just once, and abruptly starts crying, “And Reggie sent me a note begging me to come home and I *didn’t* because Christmas with the Potters was so much better and I didn’t come back and I didn’t even send him a letter or anything.”

He’s sobbing now, full-on tremors shaking his back, and Harry moves to help Sirius to sleep like he and Tom have done many times.

Remus shakes his head and says, “I’ve got this boys, why don’t you head to bed?”

So Tom takes Harry's hand and says, "Come on now darling, it's time to give them some space," and guides Harry up the steps with a hand on the younger boy's lower back.

As they walk away, Harry can hear Remus saying, "I know Sirius, I know."

"He was supposed to be better 'thn me, Rem, he waz gonna be the kid who turned this curse-ed-ed house around. 'S why I din't push im, you know? He waz gonna fix us. I really thought that."

Remus's voice is steady, "I know, Sirius. It wasn't your fault, okay, not your fault. But you can't keep getting like this with Tom and Harry. It's not fair to them."

Sirius' voice rises in pitch, "Not fair? You tell me, iz Harry bettr off somewhere they don' let em celebre-it-ate Christmas? Iz Tom bettr off in a house with an ab-abusive mother who dint love him enough to stay alive? I'm doing better by these boys than they ever -- than I ever -- than even *you* ever got! Aren't I? Isn't it enough? Isn't it? It is enough, right? It has to be enough. Remus, Remus, *when* will it be enough? I'm so tired, Rem, I'm so --"

Remus' voice is soft and soothing but Harry can no longer make out the words.

"Come on now, sweetheart," Tom says, "it will all be better in the morning."

But it won't be. Not really.

In the morning, like clockwork, Sirius will yell at Kreacher at exactly six am. There will be sixteen fires burning and Sirius will say nothing about this night and instead want to know everything about Harry and Tom's lives. In the morning there will be two overly large breakfasts for Harry (and one mediocre breakfast for Tom and Sirius to share) and a gentle kind of affection between this odd family of three that grows stronger with every passing day.

And in the evening, there will be stories and drinking and tears and the echoes of tragedies that are in no way dampened by the decade that's passed since their unfolding.

Sirius has a heart made of bronze clockwork. He's shiny, abrasive -- *loud* when he's excited and *loud* when he's anguished and methodical about all his actions besides. He's tick-tick-ticking, each cog in his machinery well oiled and well polished and counting down -- always down.

(T-minus 718, and counting)

What happens, Sirius, when the number hits zero?

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The first thought Tom has when he and Harry emerge from the fireplace in Grimmauld place is "*oh no.*" The house is dirty and grimy and falling apart with decades of disuse. But Harry says he'll fix it up. And Tom admits that fixing up this pigsty seems like a good project to take his artist's mind off of the dangers of the moment.

The first thought Tom has when he wakes up the next morning to Harry painting one of the living room walls Gryffindor red is "*gag me sideways with a wooden spoon and call it a mercy killing.*"

(It is something Beatrice Haywood has been known to say, on occasion.)

He breathes once, deeply, and asks, “Darling, is that really the best color we could paint this wall?”

Harry grins with a face full of red splatter, thirty-seven little freckles of paint, and says, “This *is* the best color *I* could paint this wall. No better color out there.”

The house-elf, “Kreacher” Tom’s pretty sure he heard Sirius announce, is glaring at Harry with loathing and muttering, “Child of filth and blood traitors and poor, poor mistress,” and Sirius is reclining on a dusty couch with a day old paper and an empty mug and a bright smile.

“You tell that yellow-lover!” He yells, “Red, red, I say! Red! Paint the walls common-room red! Us Gryffindors outnumber his hardworking Hufflepuff ass.”

Delighted, Harry says, “Sirus! You just swore.”

Sirius guffaws and says, “Swore to look after you? Of course I did. Never a better oath made. That goes for looking after you as well, Mr. Tom Hufflepuff Black.”

Tom swallows a grimace at the nickname. He merely tolerates this man for Harry. Nothing more. Still, he sits down gingerly on the end of the dusty couch and watches Harry keep painting. This is not art -- just methodical brush strokes on a dirty wall. Harry is still mesmerizing in his oversized grey shirt and jean overalls flecked with

color.

Sirius lays down his empty mug on the floor. “Hufflepuff,” he murmurs, “and I thought no Black would ever one-up my being a Gryffindor. You’ve got balls, kid.”

Tom relaxes into the couch and gives Sirius a sardonic look. “Some would say us ‘puffs have no balls. We’re the ‘leftovers,’ remember?”

Sirius shakes his head. “That’s a load of hogwash and always has been. They say Moody was a Hufflepuff and by Merlin, I swear that man has balls of fucking steel.”

Harry giggles and says, “Sirius, you swore again!”

“Swore that I was the best looking bloke around? You bet I did! But it looks like Tom’s coming for my throne.”

That first day passes in a series of quips and cleaning and ends in the evening with Sirius pouring a bit of alcohol into his tea and telling stories of all the mischief he and James got into at school.

He’s a drinker, that Sirius Black. Every morning he’s bright-eyed and bushy-tailed and endlessly (relentlessly) affectionate.

He’ll lock Tom in a headlock just because, ruffle his hair to see him squirm -- on Christmas morning he tackles Tom into the snow and then gives him a quick kiss on the forehead for being, “the best nephew-poo a former convict could ask for!”

But he's still a drinker at the end of every day. Harry takes to cleaning up after Sirius with the kind of ease of a boy who doesn't know that he deserves any better. Tom helps because he does not know that there is any better.

Sirius drinks. Hermione studies. Harry paints. Remus hates himself all the time but especially before the full moon. Ron is… not Tom's friend. All these things just seem irrevocably, undeniably, true.

So Tom does his best not to dwell on it. Sirius is always better in the morning.

On boxing day (and after Sirius' worst alcohol-induced breakdown to-date,) Tom wakes up with a soft sweater being wrestled onto his torso.

It's yellow and knitted and… oh no… "Is this a Weasley sweater?" He asks, voice deadly calm.

"Well," Fred says from one side of his body, "You didn't open it last night and -- "

"-- Mum would be just heartbroken," George continues, "if you didn't wear it today. It's the last day we're here, you see."

"You wouldn't want to break an old woman's heart, would you?" Fred asks.

Tom grumbles as the sweater is pulled all the way on. "I will break your necks if you ever accost me while I am sleeping again."

“Accost, says he!” George repeats, “I shall endeavor to do so again, says I!”

“And so shall I,” Fred says.

“And so shall he,” says Geroge.

Tom muffles his face into a pillow. “I hate you both. You realize that, right?”

“We broke Harry out of Durzkaban last year and protect him every Quidditch game from flying bludgers,” Fred observes.

“You couldn’t hate us if you tried,” George announces. They take a moment to flounce simultaneously onto either side of where Tom is trying to become one with his unfathomably soft (and his, the first that is just his) mattress.

The twins aren’t wrong. They protect Harry and they’re easy to talk to and wickedly smart in rather unorthodox ways.

“Although,” George says seriously, “we thought we might hate you when we first met you.”

“Did you?” Tom asks.

“Yes,” Fred replies, “We thought that maybe you’d cursed Ginny. We don’t know for how long or with what, but Ginny was cursed by something last year. It made her all weird and mum had to take her to

mind-healer when we got back from Egypt."

"The mind healer," George says, "was convinced that Ginny had been haunted by some ghost named 'Tom.' Ginny said she didn't know what Tom looked like but she'd recognize his handwriting anywhere."

Tom feels himself breathing quickly and forces himself to relax. "Did she? I mean, did she recognize the handwriting somewhere?"

"Well," Fred says, "She said yours was the closest match. Your name's a dead ringer for her ghost too."

"But even she knows now it couldn't have been you! You're a Hufflepuff besotted with Harry Potter. You're not exactly a cursed object." George laughs.

"And even if you were the person who cursed her," Fred says with a hint of threat, "we're pretty sure you don't seem like you would do it again." They're both still at either of his sides. The tension of the room is thick enough Tom can taste it on his tongue.

"I suppose," Tom says with carefully formed words, "it's good you guys know I would never hurt your little sister." (Again.)

And that's enough for Fred and George to go back to being jokesters and the tension to bleed out. Tom wonders how many people have witnessed just how smart they truly are. If Tom were a different person maybe he'd feel threatened. But Tom's been inside of hell and seen London choked by ashes. If these two boys ever seem like they'll get in the way of Tom's plans, his affection for them won't stop him from burning their world down.

“Have you seen the Black family tapestry?” Fred asks.

“I’m not on it,” Tom says, “But neither is Sirius.”

“Yeah, blasted off, I heard,” George says, “Just like our Grandma Cedrella. She had a cousin, Marius, who was blasted off when he was like eleven because he was a squib. We’ve got a second cousin who’s an accountant and we don’t talk about him much, but we talk about him, you know?”

“Pureblood culture is…” *inane, stupid, so concerned with appearance that these lords and ladies are just begging for a leader to take them in any direction I can convince them is ‘pure’…* “problematic.”

“At best,” Fred snorts. “But hey, I guess we’re kinda cousins in a weird way.”

George says, “So, I guess, welcome to the family.”

Tom looks at the two of them and wonders what would have happened if he’d met them fifty years ago. *Family. I don’t need it.* Still, Tom says, “Thanks.”

They head down the stairs together.

Hermione arrives for breakfast and sits next to Tom because the two of them enjoy having obscure conversations about ancient runes no one can understand (and occasionally about Horcruxes) and Sirius is as cheerful and rude as ever.

The holidays pass quickly. Tom pretends not to care when Harry gets clay from his aunt for New Year's.

He's so happy. This is why we let her live. For this. For Harry.

But there are nights he hates Petunia, nights when Harry smiles and talks with great big hand-motions about how, "maybe we'll be a real family one day. Maybe, maybe she'll walk me down the aisle. You know, like a parent. Like I'll have Sirius on one side and Petunia on the other and she'll be happy to be there. Maybe Dudley will come. He sends letters too. Wouldn't that be -- I mean, that *would* be everything."

Tom will say, "Yes, darling, that sounds lovely," and think all the while about how fragile Petunia looked in her sterile house and how he had all the time in the world to make her grovel like a pig and wring her overly long neck. She deserves none of Harry's forgiveness but he's given her all of it. He even sent her back a letter after New Year's. Tom doesn't know what it said. He couldn't bring himself to look.

School starts up again and Hermione comes over every day because "my house only has one fireplace and that's not nearly enough."

Tom gives her the courtesy of not announcing her obvious meddling with time. He does, however, feel rather like she has managed to age an extra year and is not so much younger than him that he feels embarrassed to view her as an advisor of sorts.

Ron comes over too many afternoons and looks at Tom with ill-concealed suspicion.

And in the nights, Harry starts to curl up in Tom's lap when Sirius

pours firewhisky in his mug. Remus comes over more and more often to deal with his drunk friend.

The routine lasts for three months of school done by fireplace learning (and Snape managing to be no less threatening from afar) before it all changes in ways Tom couldn't control.

Harry runs out of a meeting he was having in the newly cleaned seventh parlor with bright cheeks and eyes sparkling.

He skids to a stop in front of where Tom and Sirius are relaxed and playing a game of chess. (Tom is winning.)

"Oliver's just gotten approval for us to keep playing Quidditch!" He says with a bright smile.

"What?" Tom asks. "What has Oliver done?"

Sirius says, "That's great!"

"We can't do it like normal, obviously, but the wards are getting close to done and it's his last year so the Quidditch teams can go to the castle just for the games. There'll have to be dementors watching us play in case of Pettigrew somehow getting on which is awful, but Oliver says, 'this is the year, the last year, the most important year, so we'll take what we can get.' And I mean, I can't let my team down!"

As Harry finishes talking, the fireplace turns bright green and out walk two Weasley twins.

“Harrikins! Such news!”

“I know!” Harry gushes, “just think of it, winning the cup for Oliver’s last year.”

“Oh trust us,” they say, “It’s all dear old Ollie thinks of.”

“Day in,” says George.

“And day out,” Fred says.

Will this make you happy, Harry? It’s dangerous. Stay on the ground, with me, where it’s safe.

“That doesn’t seem like a good idea with Pettigrew still on the loose,” Tom says.

Sirius has managed to put Tom into check while he was distracted. “Oh come on, let Harry live a little,” he says.

“Tom won’t *let* me do anything,” Harry says, “I decide my life for myself.”

Oh, is that what you do?

So Harry starts spending afternoons practicing Quidditch at the burrow and Tom doesn’t come.

Throw away your safety for a stupid game, why don't you?

If Tom starts looking for ways to make sure Harry will survive any fall, it's not a problem. It's just… research.

He and Sirius spend many afternoons playing chess or cards or talking about the world while they wait for Harry to come home from practice dripping in sweat.

Home.

One morning, when Hermione is sitting next to Tom and Sirius is smiley as ever but wincing because of a hangover, Tom tsks and slides the man a hangover cure he brewed just for this purpose.

Hermione raises a brow and whispers, "You love him."

"Who? Harry?" Tom asks. He doesn't think he loves Harry but… he can see where Hermione got that idea.

"No, him too but that's obvious to everyone other than the two of you. No. You love Sirius."

Tom looks at where Sirius is looking at a piece of toast that is not burned and announcing, "God, would you look at this? Kreacher has smiled down upon me today. This is lovely. Just lov-eh-lay. Isn't it just the best thing you ever did see, Harry?"

Harry is laughing with his head thrown back and saying, "You need to see more things, Sirius, if that's what gets you going."

“Is that what passes for gratitude in this house?” Comes Sirius’ indignant squawk.

He’s so childish.

“It’s not love,” Tom replies.

“No?” Hermione prods. “There’s more than one way to love someone.”

“I don’t love anyone.” Isn’t that what Dumbeldore always said? He’s the child of a love potion. It doesn’t matter, anyway. Love makes people lose all reasons. Love is just a pair of manacles disguised as something beautiful.

Hermione squints at him. “Well,” she says after a breath, “that sounds lonely.”

Tom looks back across the table to where Sirius is smearing apricot jam all over Harry’s face as his artist attempts to cover Sirius’ hair with scrambled eggs. They look uncomfortably perfect, like they slot into place and fill all the empty holes the universe ever decided to tear.

It’s not love.

“It isn’t,” Tom says.

“If you say so,” Hermione says in a tone that suggests she thinks he’s speaking absolute garbage. She takes a bite of toast.

Sirius calls out, “Hey look, Hermione got a good piece of bread too!”

“Oh, look at that. It’s lov-eh-lay!” Harry cackles.

It’s not love.

“What, are you boys jealous?” Hermione taunts.

It’s not.

Tom refuses to attend the first Quidditch game Harry plays at Hogwarts. It’s not that he doesn’t support Harry, he does. It’s just that Sirius is also going to the game and Tom wants a day to look at the Black family library on his own and check out if there is anything on Horcruxes.

He spends the afternoon searching through book after book only to find absolutely nothing of importance. Kreacher glares at him the whole time from a respectful distance.

Harry comes back with Sirius at his side and confetti in both their hairs.

“I caught the snitch,” Harry says, “And we won.”

“The kid just about dived off his broom and caught it with the tips of his fingers -- I’ve never seen anything like it. He’s as good as Fyodor

Pushkin was in Russia circuit 1956 and that man was praised for having the fingers of a niffling sprite." Sirius gushes. "God, if James were here he'd have lost his *shit."*

"You're doing a good job of that on your own, aren't you?" Tom teases, "Merlin you're just like a proud dad."

"Proudest Uncle slash Godfather you ever did see," Sirius agrees.

He pulls Tom and Harry into his arms with surprising strength and kisses the sides of their heads. Tom resists the urge to pull away. He feels oddly warm.

It's not love.

Neither Tom nor Harry are surprised when Sirius spends the night drinking himself silly and slurring out how much he loved James. "He'd have known what to do with life. I'm just drifting…" Sirius says with his eyes half-closed, "It's always the ones who don't deserve it who go."

"You deserve to live," Harry says.

"I deserve nothing," Sirius says, "But I can't do anything about that. James deserved everything but he didn't get it. James didn't get *you*, Harry. *I* got you. And I'm trying my best. I promise. I promise. I promise..."

Tom tries to muster disgust for this drunkard in front of him but he can't. "Come on now, let's help him out," he says to Harry. Harry nods.

He and Harry begin levitating Sirius to bed. Sirius looks at Tom with a grateful smile and says, “Thanks, Reg. You always have my back.”

Tom doesn’t even blink even though his heart feels like it's being squeezed down into nothingness, he just lets out a sigh and says, “Always.”

He and Harry spend the night together in Tom’s bed by unspoken agreement. Harry nestles into Tom’s side. “He started drinking at eight again tonight.”

“Yeah,” Tom says, “He did.” And he knows the words he speaks next are lies. But these are the words of a boy who’s never known what home can be and knows what he’s feeling isn’t love but wants, desperately, for something good in his life to stay good.

So Tom says, “It’ll all be better in the morning.”

***

The wind is howling and coming down in sheets so thick, Tom can barely see half a meter in front of him. He’s trying to calm down his beating heart as he thinks about Harry flying in these conditions.

It’s one of the last Quidditch games of the season and Tom decided to finally show up.

He’s not sure who he’s supposed to be hoping will win. If Gryffindor wins this game, they’ll go to the final with Slytherin next week. But

they're playing Hufflepuff and Cedric's the seeker. Tom and Cedric are … friends of a sort.

Tom's wearing a yellow and black scarf but sitting with Sirius and the Weasleys. Ron is pointedly ignoring him and Hermione is sitting next to Ginny.

Sirius throws an arm around Tom's shoulders. "Boy, the sky is really pouring, isn't it?" He says.

Sirius is wearing so many coats it looks like he's become the same size as Vernon Dursley. He puts on a brave face for these Quidditch games but the presence of dementors on the outskirts of the school gets to him.

"How will we see Harry in this weather?" Tom asks.

"Lee Jordan will say what's happening," Arthur Weasley replies, "and besides, only Harry needs clear vision to see that snitch, eh? We're just here to watch the magic happen." Arthur pauses and then leans his head near Hermione and asks, "Did I get that muggle saying correct?"

Hermione nods, "Yeah, that was alright. Nice going, Arthur."

"Hoorah!" Arthur says.

"But the saying doesn't make sense," Ron complains, "Hogwarts is a castle for teaching *magic.* Quidditch is a *magic* game. The *magic* ***always*** happens."

“Well no one expects you to become an expert on the muggle world, do they, Ronald?” Hermione retorts.

“I’d rather have Lockheart as a teacher again,” Ron agrees.

“Oh hush up you two, the game’s about to start,” Ginny says. Tom can see her red-red hair even in the darkness and with rain pouring all around them. She’s small and obnoxious and young and so painfully alive.

If I hadn’t met Harry and if you hadn’t thrown me away, would you even be here? Would I have left you broken on the chamber floor?

“And they’re off folks! This is shaping up to be one of the best games ever to grace these hallowed fields. The Lions and Duffers --”

McGonagall yells, “Lee!”

“-- Sorry, the Lions and Badgers are not known for being cheaters. This game will be much better than the last game where Slytherin and Ravenclaw proved that both houses are capable of much mischief. Diggory’s in top form on his nimbus, but look at Harry throwing caution to the wind on his new firebolt. Never seen a faster flier. Oh good score by Alicia, Gryffindor’s up 10 and leading the game right now --”

Tom mutters under his breath and pulls out his wand. “ *Vayahi miraeh,”* he says and the area in front of him clears until he can see the game. It’s still dark but he can watch Harry in his slightly overlarge red-lined cloak and ridiculous goggles zipping on his broomstick.

Fred and George are right -- they make excellent protectors for Harry on the field. A bludger is heading for Harry's blind spot and about to smash into his back and then --

"Wham! Fred Weasley comes out of nowhere and smacked the bludger back to the 'Puffs. Now that's some first-class beating, no one outdoes the Weasley twins on any of the teams if I'm being honest. And oh! Alicia scores again and might I say she looked mighty fine doing it too --"

"LEE!"

"--- Sorry Minnie, I mean, Alicia scores on the Hufflepuff keeper and Gryffindor's up 20-0."

Harry's a blur on his broom and Cedric is doing his best not to look like he's just following Harry around the pitch. It's not a bad strategy. Harry's been praised as being the best seeker in half a century.

Harry's making lazy circles above the pitch when he clearly spots something and in the next moment, he's tilting his broom forward and rushing at full tilt toward the ground.

"Oh folks, it looks like Harry's caught sight of something, that's for sure. Cedric's hot on his tail but Harry could be pulling a Wronski feint. He's well-known for those."

Harry's broom is almost entirely vertical and the ground is getting closer and closer and the rain beats down on his back.

"He's gonna pull up soon, right?" Tom asks.

“When he needs to, he will. Harry means to do what he’s doing. Don’t worry,” Sirius responds.

But Tom can’t help but worry as Harry races to the unforgiving grass. Tom’s standing up before he’s aware of what he’s doing and about to cast something, anything, because Harry’s broom is about to crash in a million pieces, Cedric’s already pulled away, there’s grass tickling the top of Harry’s floppy hair and he’s moving impossibly fast and ---

He bucks up the brooms at the last possible second, his knees touching down on wet earth before he’s back speeding toward the sky.

“Would you look at that, ladies and gentlemen! No one does the Wronski better than Potter. Maybe not even Wronski himself. Cedric got scared and didn’t follow Potter all the way down, but he’s not a Gryffindor is he so --”

“LEE! Stop with the blatant favoritism,” McGonagall shouts.

“-- Anyway, an excellent block by Wood and Gryffindor keeps their 40-0 lead.”

“You can sit down now,” Comes Sirius’ patient voice.

It says a lot about Tom’s frayed nerves that all he can say is, “this sport is too dangerous.”

Sirius pulls Tom down and ruffles his dripping black hair. “You can’t just keep the people you love in a box.”

Tom's first thought is, *can't I?*

His second thought he voices aloud: "It's not love."

Sirius shakes his head looking impossibly wise. "It doesn't matter what you call it. What you two feel for each other, that's love."

Tom stays quiet and focuses on the game.

It's not love.

He ignores the way Sirius' too many coats make the man warm at his side.

"And Gryffindor's up again, the score is 50-0. The snitch has yet to be spotted -- oho -- I spoke too soon. See that flash? No, neither did I. But Cedric and Harry are both racing toward something and I put ten galleons in the pot that it's the snitch."

Harry and Cedric are both side by side on their brooms and so close their cloaks are curling together in the angry wind.

Harry rolls down to the underside of his broom with fingers grasping at the edges of a golden sphere when an unnatural chill falls over the field.

The rain starts to come down in sheets of ice.

Sirius is shaking -- almost catatonic at Tom's side.

"Arthur!" Molly shrieks, "Sirius needs help!"

Harry's gone slack on his broom and he's starting to fall. Tom watches with muted horror as about a hundred dementors converge on the shield, skeletal fingers outstretched.

He tries to think of a happy memory but all he can see is Harry falling down, down, down, and not for sport.

Sirius' eyes are wide and unseeing and in the next moment, there's a big black dog under a pile of coats whimpering.

Someone is screaming. It takes Tom a moment to realize it's Ginny. Hermione has a wand out and seems to be thinking something.

And Harry's falling. As he drops down in the air, he flips himself around so that's he's facing the sky and somehow there's a wand in his palm.

His voice echoes and drowns out the sound of the pouring rain.

"EXPECTO PATRONUM."

The Ceryneian Hind Patronus erupts from the tip of Harry's wand. She's magnificent and enormous. Her antlers of spun gold shine so brightly for a moment Tom almost swears the sun has broken through the clouds.

In the next moment, Cedric catches Harry on his broom and the two of them reach for something at the same time, rolling gently into the grass in a tumble of entwined limbs.

As the Ceryneian Hind cantors around the pitch and chases away the dementors, McGonagall vaults onto the field.

“Are you alright?” She asks urgently to Harry and Cedric. They both sit up, a snitch clearly held between both their hands.

“Never been better,” Harry grins up at her.

“Merlin, Potter, warn a guy before you Wronski feint *without* a broom.” Cedric jokes.

“I’m my own warning,” Harry says.

“And it looks like both Cedric and Harry caught the snitch together -- so I guess -- Gryffindor wins!” Lee announces. "Also, I suggest everyone get a bite of chocolate after the game, those dementors got a little close for comfort."

Tom notices that Oliver Wood has started crying -- or maybe that’s just the rain. And maybe it's the rain making sounds that approximate, "We've made it to the final."

McGonagall is looking up at the clouds with a frown and furrowed brow.

“They weren’t supposed to do that,” Hermione says, “The dementors.”

“That was bloody awful,” Ron says, “Thought I’d never be warm again.”

“Harry’s Patronus was very impressive,” Arthur says, “Never seen one with any color other than silver.”

“Yes, well,” Molly says, “Let’s get you all home, dears. Sirius and Ginny don’t seem to be doing too well.”

Sirius is still in dog form and Ginny is burrowing herself into Hermione’s side.

“That might be best,” Arthur agrees.

Tom refuses to let Harry out of his sight for the remainder of the day when they get back home. Harry’s ecstatic because, “we won, Tom! Didya see? And my Patronus. Whoo, I reckon she drew off about a hundred of those suckers.”

He’s so fragile. How did I not realize that? Just one thing different and he’d be dead. That’s not… that’s unacceptable.

The image of Harry falling is so deeply seared into his mind that a few weeks later (and after Gryffindor’s beaten Slytherin in the finale and the school year's ended) when Sirius announces, “I’ve got us tickets to the Quidditch cup!” and Harry’s bouncing up and down with excitement, “I heard Krum Will be playing seeker and he’s only three years older than me,” Tom says, “We shouldn’t go.”

“Why?” Harry asks.

“I have a bad feeling about it,” Tom says blithely. It wouldn't do to come across as paranoid.

“It’s just Quidditch,” Harry says, “What could go wrong?”

Chapter End Notes

Hahahaha stay tuned for some fun with the quidditch cup next chapter. Also, I am so excited for the triwizard tournament. I actually have a full plan and everything. Woah

Please leave a comment so I know I am not writing into the void (I worry) and drop a kudos if you feel so inclined. That's all folks. *cue ominous music*

For now.

So I did this thing in both of my other fics, so I shall now do my first ever (but not last) random dialogue A/N in DF

———

Dementor 1: I don't know why the wizards always run away
Dementor 2: I know, all we try to do is kiss them but they get so upset
Dementor 3: And that Potter kid calling up a Patronus? Rude.
Dementor 1: So rude.
Dementor 2: Wizards are the worst.
Dementor 3: Hey, do you guys reckon the centaurs will like us more?
Dementor 1: ...would it hurt to check?

Interview

Chapter Notes

Hiya folks! It's been a while -- wow! I'm sorry about how long it's been. Not that you asked, but my laptop broke, my roommate went actually crazy, and I survived finals. This has been a long time coming so I hope you feel like this is worth the wait.

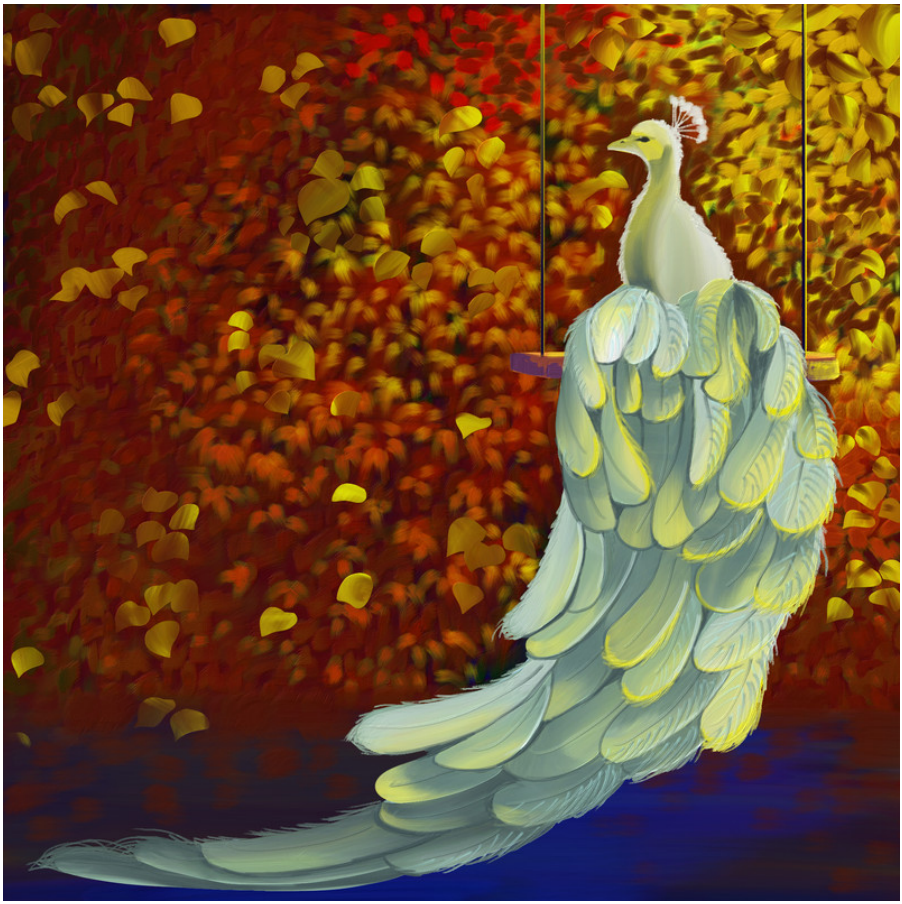
Thanks to everyone for reading this and putting up with how long it's been. In the time I was away and dealing with an odd assortment of small but meaningful problems, my beautiful and amazing sister (who may or may not have helped inspire my need to write the Petunia Interlude because older sisters are wondrous treasures) graduated University which was a cause for much celebration.

Also, thank you to spirithorse16 for providing a free version of the fourth HP book in your fic about reading the book. 'Twas a rather useful reference.

And guys!!! 8k Kudos???? I'm living the dream.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This absolutely stunning piece of art was made by @thyears_ so go check them out on insta! This is the immortalization Neige deserves. Let's all take a quiet moment to remember the beautiful bird that died too soon.



If you have any art you want to be included, send it to maytal.w.booth@gmail.com!

Everything could go wrong, is what Tom did not say. And yet, Tom is undoubtedly proved correct. At first, nothing at the Quidditch world cup seems particularly problematic. The day before they leave, Kreacher serves Harry an unfathomably large breakfast that the poor boy cannot possibly eat in its entirety, and glares malevolently at Sirius.

Harry says around a bite of a chocolate croissant, “it’s weird that I haven’t gotten back my N.E.W.T.s for enchanted artistry.”

Sirius says, “You’re a bloody fourth year. What’re you taking N.E.WT.s

for?"

Harry says, "There's no O.W.L for enchanted artistry and there aren't really N.E.W.T.s either because it's not a ministry approved course, but when you're in sixth or seventh-year class, you can send a portfolio to the International Confederation of Wizards for evaluation and get a N.E.W.T score equivalent. Only, this year Professor Bagerwood sent out my portfolio but I haven't got back my score."

Tom says, "I'm sure you got an O, darling. There's nothing else they could possibly give you."

Sirius says, "Wait, wait, can we go back to the part where my fourth-year godson is apparently enrolled in a seventh-year class? I've got a genius!"

Harry blushes adorably and then says, "Well, Tom's the genius. I'm just good with art."

"A prodigy," Tom corrects, "Harry is a prodigy."

After breakfast, the three of them portkey to the Quidditch world cup. Unsurprisingly, Sirius has ended up renting an oversized tent that accommodates not only Tom and Harry but also all the Weasleys and Hermione. Molly Weasley, unsurprisingly, yells, "This is a waste of money."

Equally unsurprisingly, Sirius yells back, "I don't *waste* money. I *spend* it. It's a subtle difference."

Ginny Weasley says, "Mum, let's just enjoy this, yeah?"

It is also not surprising that Sirius Black, the poor innocent soul who was sent to Azkaban for doing his best by his best friend, and the man who possesses a great deal of money and rakish good looks, is by far the most famous person in attendance to the game. Harry is thrilled to finally be out of the spotlight. Sirius spends the afternoon getting all sorts of gifts from well-wishers.

Harry and Ron room together and Tom, unfortunately, ends up in a room with Percy. Percy, being one year older than Tom, offers him a good deal of unsolicited advice Tom does his best to tune out.

And yet, he finds himself wondering about his future. He lies in his oddly large bed in the charmed tent room and considers. He's never really thought beyond getting out of the diary and killing Voldemort. But Voldemort does not seem to be dead or alive at the moment.

Tom's been getting flashes of odd dreams that are not his own, and yet come from his fractured soul, but it does not seem that Voldemort has become strong enough to do anything or be killed.

Tom's obviously been rather interested in Harry, but he was a person before Harry. He remembers the feel of little lords kneeling at his feet and the rush of being so remarkable princes would bow before him. He finds he misses it.

And Harry is so very fragile. Tom does not want to live forever as he did in the diary, but he does not want to die either. Perhaps he'll learn how to make a philosopher's stone. And he doesn't know what he'll do with his future. He's graduating from Hogwarts this year.

"-- can't let your family dictate the rest of your life. Sometimes, the best thing you can do is --"

“Percy,” Tom interrupts, “What do you think the best profession is?”

“Oh,” Percy says, “Well, minister of magic, naturally.”

Tom thinks of the bureaucratic power that would give him, and of all the headaches and red tape and inane meetings. “Naturally,” he echoes.

Percy does not pick up on the sarcasm and instead launches into a monologue: “I’ve got a ten-year plan, myself. Well, ten years and I’ll be the senior undersecretary, and if it all goes according to plan, and I’ll make minister when I’m seventy-eight. You know, it’s all about starting--”

Tom does not want to be a minister of magic. He might try to be a lord, perhaps? He’s a Black now. He could live like Abraxus Malfoy. He could teach. He does like Defense Against the Dark Arts.

Harry and Ron spend the first day of the Quidditch game making moon-eyes at the Veelas and Bulgarian seeker Viktor Crumble… or something. Harry says, "Isn't Krum amazing?"

Tom turns his head away. There’s familiar anger that begins to thrum beneath Tom’s skin. What is he doing? Playing house? He’s never been dependent on another human being in his entire existence, not until Harry. He was alone, and Harry gave him the whole world. Even so, that does not mean he should spend the rest of his life watching as Harry inevitably succumbs to death. Harry even courts it, flying full tilt at the ground beneath him on a small sliver of wood.

"In a manner of speaking," he responds.

Tom won't just let Harry die. He won't let himself become an afterthought in the story that is Harry Potter. He's going to be someone. He's going to have purebloods bow before him again. He may not be Tom Riddle any longer, but Tom Black is intelligent and *hungry*. Harry can be a player in *his* story.

Ireland wins the cup, but Krumboy still manages to catch the snitch. Tom almost hunts the seeker down when the game is over. He thinks the Bulgarian teen doesn't need both of his eyes. *So even if Harry sees you, you'll never be able to see him.*

He does manage to control himself, but he feels himself getting irritable during the night when Sirius gets rowdy from a packed flask and gesticulates wildly as Harry and the Weasleys spend hours rehashing a game they all saw.

Tom says, "I'm going to step out for a minute," and doesn't wait around for anyone to reply before he slips out of the tent. He breathes in the night air.

He leans against the canvas tent and slides down until his knees can curl into his chest and his back is resting against the tent's wall. He feels the grass beneath his fingertips from where he sits on the wet earth. He watches fireflies illuminate the grass like stars.

The quiet of the moment is broken when Tom hears a scream. He grabs his wand and sees a crowd of wizards, tightly packed and moving together with wands pointing straight upward, marching slowly across the field. Tom examines them… they don't seem to have faces that can be seen, rather their heads are hooded and their faces are covered in bone-white masks.

Four grotesque and contorting figures rise into the air and hover high above his head. Tom is reminded of puppeteers with marionettes. Two

of the figures in the air are small and child-like in proportion. Tom takes a moment to disillusion himself and slips between the throng of masked figures. More wizards join the marching group, laughing and pointing up at the floating bodies. There's a kind of frenetic energy to the whole thing, and Tom can understand the appeal of being one of the masked figures.

Tents are crumbling and falling as the marching crowd grows. Tom sees a few masked marchers blast tents out of their way as they move forward. Several tents catch fire and the screaming gets louder until it is almost unbearable.

The floating people are suddenly illuminated as they pass over a burning tent and Tom recognizes one of them: Mr. Roberts, the campsite manager. He's a boring sort of man, but tolerable.

The other three look as though they might be his wife and children.

One of the marchers below flips Mrs. Roberts upside down with his wand and she struggles to maintain her modesty as the crowd below her jeers and mocks.

"Didn't know muggles had lady parts," one marcher crows, "thought they were too much like maggots."

Tom is more concerned with watching the smallest Muggle child, a boy who looks to be about six, who is spinning like a top, his head flopping limply from side to side.

Tom grits his teeth. He is many things, but a passive observer is not one of them. If he cancels the spell, he's worried that the family will fall.

The colored lanterns that had lit the path to the stadium have been extinguished. Dark figures are blundering through the trees and children are crying.

Tom breathes deeply. He casts a cushioning charm underneath the Roberts family and strides forward. “Finite Incantem,” he mutters. Immediately the four muggles crash to the ground with a thud. As soon as the family is on the ground, ministry officials converge on the masked figures and seem to be working as fast as they can to get the Roberts family to safety.

Tom finds himself getting pushed to the edge of the assembled marchers by the forest. On his way, he pulls Ginny out of the path of a spell and deposits her by a tree.

He continues to be pushed along until he bumps into someone, a masked wizard.

The wizard in the mask looks around wildly in the dark. “Who is there?” He asks in a shrill tone. “Show yourself.”

Tom lets the spell peel off him slowly. To the masked wizard, it must look like Tom emerges slowly from dripping shadows. Tom smiles wide and deadly.

“Here I am,” he says softly, “Do you have any other requests?”

The wizard stares at Tom for a moment and Tom sees a muggle couple running away in his periphery.

“You’re that Black boy, aren’t you?” The man asks, “The new filthy half-blood pretending to belong to a noble family.”

Tom’s eyes flash. *Pretending? Am I just pretending to take Sirius to bed when he can’t stand on his own two feet? Who decides what’s family anyway?*

“My name," Tom says after a pause, “is Tom. You, however, will call me ‘my lord.'”

The masked man laughs once. “I would never bow to a half-blood.”

Tom can’t help his own smirk, “No?” He asks, “Well, I suppose I’ll just have to persuade you. I’m told I can be very… convincing.”

“Doubtful, boy,” the masked man says, pointing his wand at Tom and yelling out a cutting curse.

Tom neatly sidesteps the flashing light and clicks his tongue. “Oh,” he says, faux disappointed, “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Why ever not?” The masked man asks, “Frightened?” He flings off another curse. Tom throws up a shield and starts to close the distance between him and the wizard. With every curse sent his way, Tom blocks it and takes a step forward.

“Perhaps,” Tom says, neatly ducking underneath a hex and taking a step forward, “You should be frightened because I’ve been missing something.” He shields against a drowning curse, takes a step, “I’ve missed being undeniable,” he blocks a flesh-rotting curse, takes a step forward, “unforgettably,” he counters a diffindo, takes another step, “

unforgivably cruel." He is now toe-to-toe with the masked man.

Without the giving man in front of him time to react, Tom croons, "Crucio." A red light springs forth from his wand tip and hits the man square in the chest.

The man immediately sinks to his knees clawing at his skin. "Stop," he croaks.

"Why should I?" Tom asks, "I have you exactly where I want you. See, it's not so hard to bow to a half-blood, is it?"

The man seems to choke on his tongue as he convulses from the pain. Tom's always had a particularly painful crucio. The man likely has less than two minutes of sanity left if Tom doesn't let up.

"Please," the masked man whispers, "have mercy."

Tom leans so that he towers over the wizard. "Please, who?"

"My lord," the man says, "Please have mercy, my lord."

Tom lets the curse end and reaches down to pat the cheek of the shivering man. "Good boy," he says.

Then he grasps the man's head in both his hands and dives inside his mind.

It's fragmented, but that's to be expected. The man's just experienced unspeakable pain. Even so, Tom gets some good information on what it means to be a death-eater and about who his former self became. Tom learns a bit about the dark mark which seems to be of particular interest — he wonders if it's possible for him to somehow use the dark marks himself.

And… Tom sees that it's possible Harry is in danger. Tom pulls himself out of the man's mind as sharp as he can and the death eater is left kneeling on the ground with a piercing headache.

"Oblivate," Tom says flippantly. It wouldn't do for someone to remember a Hufflepuff casting a cruciatus.

And then he goes to find his artist. He does have priorities. Still, he feels much more settled after the fight, if one can even call it that. Something unfurls from deep inside him and sings, *Yes, this is what we are.*

***

The end of the Quidditch World Cup goes nothing like Harry expected. He sees the Roberts getting tortured. He sees Draco leaning against a tree and pretending to be all smug and then warning Hermione to be careful in his own weird way, ("They're after people like you, Granger. It's too bad you're such a know-it-all and probably already have some spells up your sleeve to protect you from them.")

Harry's wand is stolen and used to make the Dark Mark appear in the sky. Tom reconnects with Harry minutes later and it turns out *his* wand was used to cast the cruciatus. The Aurors are still trying to learn who was the victim. It seems clear to everyone that somehow Peter Pettigrew, who is still very much at large, was somehow responsible for the whole of everything that went down at the

Quidditch cup.

And then the Daily Prophet announces the next morning, “Pettigrew infiltrates Quidditch World Cup, casts Dark Mark, and generally incites Chaos — should Azkaban keep employing Dementors? See page 12.”

In the end, Harry has a very poor opinion of the Daily Prophet, one Cornelius Fudge, and one Bartemius Crouch.

Hermione says at breakfast, "Rita Skeeter is an awful reporter. Imagine being so vile by forty-three."

The train ride to school is a rather muted affair. Tom spends half of it next to Harry making nice to Ron who seems to have warmed up to the Hufflepuff considerably. Apparently, Tom somehow saved Ginny during the Death Eater attack on the camp, and that kind of thing makes Ron feel better about Tom.

Tom spends the other half of the train ride talking to the Hufflepuffs and Slytherins he knows.

Harry ends up in a carriage with Ron, Hermione, and Neville.

Leaning against the window, Harry can see Hogwarts coming nearer, its many lighted windows blurred and shimmering behind a thick curtain of rain. Lightning flashes across the sky as their carriage comes to a halt before the great oak front doors, which stand at the top of a flight of stone steps. Everyone hurries up the stone steps into the castle to escape the storm.

Harry, Ron, Hermione, and Neville jump down from their carriage and dash up the steps too, looking up only when they are safely inside the cavernous, torch-lit entrance hall, with its magnificent marble staircase. Tom is standing off to one side, talking quietly with Adrian Pucey.

"Blimey," says Ron, shaking his head and sending water everywhere, "if that keeps up the lake's going to overflow. I'm soak - ARRGH!"

Ron is interrupted when a large, red, water-filled balloon drops from out of the ceiling onto his head and explodes.

Drenched and sputtering, Ron staggers sideways into Harry,

A second water bomb drops, narrowly missing Hermione, and bursts at Harry feet. A wave of cold water seeps outwards and into his socks.

Harry looks up and sees, floating twenty feet above them, Peeves the Poltergeist, a little man in a bell-covered hat and orange bow tie, blowing bubbles.

"I wonder if Peeves and Dumbledore go clothes shopping together," Ron whispers.

Peeves smiles widely, his malicious face contorted with concentration as he opens his mouth. He begins to sing, his voice mocking and off-key:

“Oh, most think he’s barking, the Potty wee lad,

But some are more kindly and think he’s just sad,

But Peevesy knows better and says that he’s mad —

Oh most think he’s handsome, the tall Black’s new lad

But some are more honest and think he’s so sad,

But Peevesey knows better and says that he’s bad --

So run, wee Potty, flush yourself down the toilet if you must

Forget Tom you bonkers boy, in Peeves you need trust”

Peeves cackles when his song is over. Tom looks up from his talk with Adrian Pucey sharply.

“Peeves,” he calls out, voice deceptively quiet, “I think it’s time you left.”

Peeves seems to pale, if that’s possible, and proceeds to glide through a wall and away.

"What do you think that song meant?" Hermione whispers to Harry.

"I don't know," Harry says, "Nothing good." He commits the lyrics to memory, just in case.

Without further incidence, Harry and his friends make their way into the great hall. Hundreds of candles float in mid-air and the golden plates and goblets shine with the radiance of the burning sun. The four long table houses are packed with students and Harry takes a moment to revel in the warmth of the room.

When it gets to be time for dessert, Tom winds his way over to the Slytherin table and sits down, which attracts a good deal less fuss than Harry would have expected.

"Unnatural, that one is," Seamus Finnegan says to Harry, pointing to where Tom is speaking to Theodore Nott.

"Why's that?" Harry asks around a bite of treacle tart.

Hermione says, "Don't speak with your mouth open."

"Well, I've never seen a Huffie get all up and friendly with the slimy gits, but your Tom does it all up the wazoo. I swear, he made connections with at least half a dozen Slytherins on the train ride alone. Never seen a Huffie do that before."

"Well," Ron says, "To be fair, you didn't much look at Huffies, did you, not until Tom came around and was all buddy-buddy with Harry here."

" *Hufflepuffs,* " Hermione says, stressing the whole, proper noun, "Are good at making connections. They're often friendly. And, there are more than just four types of people in the whole world so you can't expect every single person from one house to behave exactly the same way."

Dean Thomas glares at Hermione and says, "Actually, Seamus and I can expect whatever the bloody hell we want to expect. It's a free country."

“Fine then,” Hermione says, “Maybe I should have qualified that. You can’t *reasonably* expect everyone to act in the exact same manner. That would be asinine.”

“Wonder what he’s doing though,” Harry says, “he wasn’t so friendly last year.”

“Maybe he’s growing up,” Hermione suggests.

“Or maybe he’s plotting to take over the world,” Ron says cackling, “With his track record, it is possible, you have to admit.”

Harry opens his mouth to say something when Dumbledore stands up and introduces Mad-Eye Moody as the new Defense teacher. The man looks crazy, all scarred and peg-legged, and with a glass eye.

There’s a kind of oppressive silence that follows this announcement. “Bloody hell,” Ron says quietly. "He's a legend in war." Not one to be deterred by silence, Dumbeldore bravely presses on with the statement:

“There will be no Quidditch this year.”

Harry can feel the Oliver inside him saying, “NOOOO, how DARE you???”

The twins catch his eye with similar looks of absolute disgust.

“—because,” Dumbeldore says, “This year Hogwarts will be hosting

the Triwizard tournament!”

Harry stares blankly. “Wassat?” He asks no one in particular.

“What’s that?” Ron asks, “That — it’s — it’s the best thing wizards have ever done but they had to stop doing it like a century ago because too many people were dying when they were young and some people were like, ‘hey, maybe don’t have a tournament for school pride that kills off all the best and brightest of the new generation,’ and then someone else was like, ‘yeah, maybe that’s a good point,’ because all good things must end.”

“Nothing gold can stay,” agrees a girl with blonde hair and Ravenclaw robes who walks past.

"You're JOKING!" says Fred Weasley loudly to Dumbledore.

Everyone laughs, and Dumbeldore chuckles heartily.

"I am not joking, Mr. Weasley," he says, "though now that you mention it, I did hear an excellent little joke over the summer about a centaur, a banshee, and a vampire who all go to muggle university… Er - but maybe this is not the time…no…" says Dumbledore, “Where was I? Ah yes, the Triwizard Tournament… well, some of you will not know what this tournament involves, so I hope those who know will forgive me for giving a short explanation, and allow their attention to wander freely. The Triwizard Tournament was first established some seven hundred years ago as a friendly competition between the three largest European schools of wizardry: Hogwarts, Beauxbatons, and Durmstrang. The heads of Beauxbatons and Durmstrang will be arriving with their short-listed contenders in October, and the selection of the three champions will take place at Halloween. An impartial judge will decide which students are most worthy to compete for the Triwizard Cup, the glory of their school, and a

thousand Galleons personal prize money."

"I'm going for it!" Fred Weasley announces.

“We could do with some cash,” George says, clearly thinking of how much good the money would do him.

Indeed, Harry notices that everyone seems to be thinking of what it would be like to win the Triwizard tournament and are whispering loudly to one another.

Dumbledore clears his throat. "Eager though I know all of you will be to bring the Triwizard Cup to Hogwarts," he said, "the heads of the participating schools, along with the Ministry of Magic, have agreed to impose an age restriction on contenders this year. Only students who are of age - that is to say, seventeen years or older - will be allowed to put forward their names for consideration. Now to bed, all of you.”

In the common room, Fred and Geroge Weasley are absolutely livid. “This can’t be happening,” George Weasley exclaims, “I’m seventeen in April. I’m practically of age already.”

“I’ll enter anyway,” Fred says, scowling deeply. “They can’t stop me.”

“Just imagine,” Ron says, “A thousand galleons.”

“A thousand galleons,” Lee echoes with a misty-eyed expression, “I could buy so many things…”

“Like a casket,” Hermione says, “Because you might be dead.”

Tom seems to agree with Hermione. He has snuck his way inside the Gryffindor common room and he says, “I won’t be entering. Harry, you won’t either, right?”

“I’m too young,” Harry says.

“Even so,” Tom demands, “Promise me.”

“Okay,” Harry says, “I promise.”

***

The next morning, Harry goes to the Enchanted Artistry classroom for what he thinks will be his first day of seventh-year art class. Beatrice Haywood waves at him from her spot underneath the eastern-most window.

“Harry!” She says, “come see, I finally got enough soul for my grandmother’s portrait to take root!”

Harry wanders over and sees a sepia-toned, fairly attractive older woman, looking back at him from a canvas.

“Well, who’s this then?” The woman asks. “Goodness, Bea, is that Harry Potter?”

“Yeah, Nan, this is Harry.”

“Goodness.”

Harry smiles down at the portrait. “Oh, well done, Bea.”

“I mean, she’s not perfect, obviously, but my nan couldn’t afford a real portrait painter and you know, that’s what I hope to be, and this is good enough for my nan. Professor Badgerwood says I’ve got a real shot at a mastery in about seven years, at the rate I’m going.”

“Oh, did you get back your N.E.W.Ts?” Harry asks.

“Nah, I didn’t send a portfolio last year. I’m doing that this year and then I hope to do well enough to study in Switzerland.”

“Oh, well then, good luck.”

“Thanks, Harry,” Beatrice says.

“Yes, thank you Harry. Harry Potter. The boy-who-lived. Wasn’t he supposed to be about three years old?” Beatrice’s nan says.

“I’m fourteen, actually,” Harry corrects.

“No, no,” the portrait says, “That can’t be right.”

“As I said,” Beatrice says, “She’s not perfect.”

"You take that back, young lady.”

“But,” Harry says, “She’s good enough.”

Professor Badgerwood holds Harry back after class and ushers Harry into his office, a small little room with walls full of carved reliefs.

“Harry,” Professor Badgerwood says, “I think you might have noticed that you didn’t get back your N.E.W.T. scores.”

“Yeah, actually, do you know what happened to them?”

“I do,” Professor Badgerwood says. He reaches into a pocket in the stone wall and pulls out a letter. “Here, this is for you.”

Mystified, Harry unfolds a letter that says, “International Confederation of Wizards: Artistry Division” on its front.

The contents of the letter are written with a delicate script:

Dear Mr. Harry Potter,

Thank you for the submission of your portfolio to the International Confederation of Wizards Academic Evaluation Review. This year, the confederation received a record number of submissions for artistic portfolios. It is generally the practice of the confederation that those

portfolios judged to be within the top five percent of submissions receive the O grade.

Mr. Potter, with respect, your portfolio was so innovative and so revolutionary, the confederation was obliged to evaluate your academic honesty. There was reasonable doubt that perhaps the work in the portfolio had not been crafted by your hand. After a thorough investigation that included interviews with your professor, the Malfoy family, several other prominent wizarding families, and the goblins of the Diagon Alley branch of Gringotts, the confederation review board came to the conclusion that the portfolio received is your original work.

Given the quality of the pieces, the confederation felt like it could not in good conscience grade your work on the same standard that submissions received for the N.E.W.T level are graded. After a long discussion, the board unanimously voted to instead place your portfolio into the submissions for masteries in Enchanted Artistry. Your work was reviewed by a second board anonymously and it is our pleasure to inform you that you were one of the three candidates selected this year to pursue the highest degree offered in this field. It is therefore the suggestion of the confederation that you be interviewed in Geneva at your earliest convenience in order to finalize your mastery in Enchanted Artistry. Congratulations.

Best wishes,

International Confederation of Wizards: Artistry Division Review Board

Harry reads it once, then twice, and then another time for good measure.

“What, what does this mean?”

“Well,” Professor Badgerwood says, “It means that the Confederation

felt like you were painting at a master's level which was so far beyond the school level of N.E.W.T students, they could not give you a N.E.W.T. score."

"Oh," Harry says, "That's too bad, I guess. But then what's this about an interview for a mastery?"

"Not just anyone can become a master of a magical discipline, Harry. Professors at this school are required to be masters in their subject for the most part. There is no way to get masteries in divination so Trelawney does not have one, and Hagrid does not have a mastery in care of magical creatures. Kettleburn did have one. The point is, Harry, masteries are evaluated based on a body of work, sometimes a written test, and an interview. To become a master of a particular subject, candidates must produce something new in their field. I invented a new color: the hexa-toned red, to get my mastery. Snape is the youngest potion master in history. I believe he invented the wolfsbane potion for his mastery. Your work, Harry, has so much innovation and inventiveness that the confederacy is allowing you to interview for the mastery right now. If you get the mastery, which you most certainly will, you will become the youngest Master in the history of the confederacy."

"But I'm not, well, I'm not that good."

"Oh but you are, Mister Potter. And oh, I won't be saying that for long, will I? Soon I'll be calling you 'Master Potter.' How exciting!"

Harry looks back at the letter. "Why do I have to go to Geneva?"

"That's where art mastery candidates interview. I suggest you go over your winter break. And, once again, congratulations, Harry."

Harry leaves the office in a state of mild shock and somehow wanders his way to transfiguration. McGonagall raises an eye at his late entrance.

“Mister Potter, care to share why you are late?”

“Professor Badgerwood wanted to talk to me,” Harry says.

“About?” She prompts.

“Oh, Geneva. And interviews. Sorry, I’ll just turn my teacup into a toad, why don’t I?”

“Yes,” McGonagall agrees, “Actually engaging with the class material would certainly be a better start than whatever it is you are doing at the moment.”

The next few days are an expected kind of chaotic. Tom is naturally ecstatic that Harry is about to get a mastery, if he passes the interview, “Which you absolutely will.”

When chatting via the fireplace, Sirius says, “I think there’s a Black family home in Geneva,” and Kreacher yells out in the background, “Wonderful Master Potter deserves all the praises, he does. Kreacher be making treacle tart for celebrations!”

Sirius grimaces and says, “And I guess Kreacher is coming too.”

Ron and Hermione agree not to tell anyone what’s going on with

Harry, but it still gets out so Harry is asked a lot about his interview for the mastery until the other schools start arriving.

The Durmstrang boat that glides over Hogwarts lake is so reminiscent of the ship Harry drew for Charon's Ferry, he almost worries that death is hanging to the broad students that unpack themselves from the wooden planks dressed in all-red and fur.

The boys and girls from Beauxbatons are the very pictures of refinement in their sky blue uniforms and smart vests and shoulder capes.

The fact that the schools have come to Hogwarts for the Triwizard Tournament is not lost on anyone. The students from Beauxbatons, however, seem just as interested in Harry and the Hogwarts culture as they do in the tournament. Durmstrang students, however, sit with the Slytherins and clearly have their eyes on victory.

Fred and George try about every trick in the book to enter their names into the goblet, but they fail.

One day, when Harry is sketching rain in the library and Tom is sitting next to him, Cedric sits down at the table. A girl from Beauxbatons, Lucette, who thinks Harry is "adorable," and Tom is, "An adonis sent to seduce," is sitting with them as well.

"Alright, Tom, level with me. Are you going to enter?" Cedric asks.

"No," Tom says.

Lucette sighs sadly. "So sad," she says, "Itz an 'onest waste. You would

look so ‘ow you say? Powerful, yes, that iz ‘ow you would look.”

“Why not?” Cedric asks.

“I’m already rich,” Tom says, “No need to stick out my neck for the glory of it, either. I’m taking twelve NEWTs this year and I fully intend to overtake Dumbledore’s record as best student.”

“…Right,” Cedric says. “Well then, can I count on you to have my back if I’m chosen as the Hogwarts champion?”

Lucette claps her hands. “Ah, you will look good too! I em sure you will look 'andsome with blood on your 'ands.”

“Thanks?” Cedric says.

“Yeah, sure,” Tom replies. “I’ll be there for you.”

Harry looks at Cedric and then back at Tom and notices the easy camaraderie the two of them seem to have. And how they both have rather broad shoulders.

“Thanks, man,” Cedric says, “Also, brilliant drawing Harry. Bravo on the almost mastery.” Cedric gets up and leaves the library.

“So,” Lucette says, “What do you want to do with your life, Tom?”

“Hmm,” he answers, “I suppose something big enough that I can tell

you to ‘wait and find out.’”

Lucette giggles, breasts bouncing and blonde hair swinging.

“Oh, ‘ow funny you are.”

“I try,” Tom says dryly.

For some reason, Harry gets a sour taste in his mouth. “Right,” he says, “Well, I’m gonna go find Ron and Hermione.” He packs away his things and begins to exit when Tom grabs his wrist.

“Why are you leaving so soon, Harry?” He asks with a dangerous sort of smile, “Something bothering you?”

Harry shakes off Tom’s grasp. “I’m fine,” he spits, “I’ll see you tomorrow, I’m sure.” He skids out of the library with an uncomfortable flush on the back of his neck and Tom’s eyes trained on his retreating figure.

When the day comes to announce who the champions will be, Harry is so distracted by the fact that he seems to be failing potions and that the new defense teacher taught the cruciatus in class, he almost doesn’t notice he’s in the great hall until Hermione is nudging his hand. Professor Moody is for some reason sitting with the Gryffindors, and Harry is doing his best to ignore the scarred defense teacher.

“Reckon Fred and George will get picked somehow anyway,” Ron is saying, “if anyone can get around the age limit, it’s them.”

"Well, the goblet is almost ready to make its decision," says Dumbledore. "I estimate that it requires one more minute. Now, when the champions' names are called, I would ask them please to come up to the top of the Hall, walk along the staff table, and go through into the next chamber" - he indicates the door behind the staff table - "where they will be receiving their first instructions."

He takes out his wand and gives a great sweeping wave with it; at once, all the candles except those inside the carved pumpkins are extinguished, plunging the hall into a state of semi-darkness.

Harry grimaces.

"Any second," Lee Jordan whispers, two seats away from Harry.

The flames inside the goblet turn red. Sparks fly from it. Then, a thin and charred piece of parchment flutters out from the top and the room gasps.

Dumbledore catches the piece of parchment and holds it at arm's length so that he can read it by the light of the flames, which have turned back to blue-white.

"The champion for Durmstrang," he reads, in a strong, clear voice, "will be Viktor Krum."

Harry sees Viktor Krum rise from the Slytherin table and slouch up toward Dumbledore; turn right, walk along the staff table, and disappear through the door into the next chamber.

All of the Durmstrang students stamp their left foot twice and yell out,

"Krum!"

"Bravo, Viktor!" booms Karkaroff, "Knew you had it in you!"

A second piece of parchment shoots out of the goblet, propelled by the flames.

"The champion for Beauxbatons," Dumbledore announces, "is Fleur Delacour!"

A girl who looks like a veela shakes out her silvery blonde hair and seems to float slightly on her way down the staff table.

"Oh look, they're all disappointed," Hermione says over the noise, nodding toward the remainder of the Beauxbatons party.

Harry is inclined to agree with that particular assessment. Three girls and four boys who have not been chosen are sobbing and holding their heads in their hands.

Once Fleur Delacour vanishes into the side chamber, silence falls again, and the tension in the room grows to an almost unbearable degree. The goblet turns red and sparks erupt, and from the flames, Dumbledore grabs a third piece of parchment.

"The Hogwarts champion," he yells, "is Cedric Diggory!"

"No!" says Ron loudly, but Harry thinks no one can hear him because the uproar from the next table is so loud. Every single Hufflepuff, even

Tom, jumps to his or her feet, screaming and stamping and laughing and hugging one another and crying joyful tears, as Cedric makes his way past them, smiling so bright he puts the candles to shame.

"Excellent!" Dumbledore calls happily the hububub dies down. "Well, we now have our three champions. I am sure I can count upon all of you, including the remaining students from Beauxbatons and Durmstrang, to give your champions every ounce of support you can muster. By cheering your champion on, you will contribute in a very real —"

But Dumbledore suddenly stops speaking, and Harry turns to the goblet, feeling rather distracted himself.

The fire in the goblet turns crimson and sparks shoot out. A long blue flame burst into the hair, carrying a thin piece of burned parchment.

Almost as a kind of thoughtless gesture, Dumbledore reaches out an aged hand and grasps the parchment. He holds it out and stares at whatever is written on it. There is a long pause and Harry begins to feel sweat bead on his brow. Then Dumbledore clears his throat. His eyes are grave. “And,” he calls out, looking rather somber, “Harry Potter.”

“No,” Harry says, “No, I didn’t — I didn’t put my name in the cup. No, I don’t want to compete. No!”

Professor Moody drapes an arm around Harry’s shoulders, “Come on now lad, it’ll be alright.”

“But I didn’t,” Harry says, “I don’t —“

Harry shrinks back at the stares leveled at him. Tom takes the moment to move away from the celebrating Hufflepuffs and goes to the Gryffindor table. He places his cool hands on the back of Harry's neck.

"Shh," he says softly, "We're going to get through this. I used a charm to call the goblins. You're going to be okay."

"I don't want this," Harry says.

"I know," Tom says, "I know."

Up at the top table, Professor McGonagall gets up and sweeps past Ludo Bagman and Professor Karkaroff to whisper urgently to Professor Dumbledore, who bends his ear toward her, frowning slightly.

"You have to go meet the other champions," Moody says, "Come on, up and at them, as they say." Moody half drags, half carries past the staff table, Tom looking frighteningly focused back at the Gryffindor table. The rest of the hall seems to be in shock.

"Well. . . through the door, Harry," says Dumbledore. His eyes have lost their twinkle.

Moody opens the door and pushes Harry through, somewhat roughly, Harry thinks distantly.

The portraits in the room all turn to look at him as he enters. One man takes off his hat and gives Harry a shallow bow.

Viktor Krum, Cedric Diggory, and Fleur Delacour are standing around the room's fireplace. They look strong and otherworldly against the brightness of the flames.

Fleur looks askance at Harry, blonde-silver hair shining. "What is it?" she asks. "Do zey want us back in ze Hall?"

Harry is considering what to say when Ludo Bagman enters the room. "Extraordinary!" He mutters, squeezing Harry's arm. He smiles at the three champions. "Absolutely extraordinary! Gentlemen. . . lady," he adds, after looking at Fleur, "May I introduce - incredible though it may seem - the fourth Triwizard champion?"

Viktor's expression turns hard and flat even as Cedric begins to look rather horrified.

Fleur Delacour tosses her hair and says, "Oh, vairy funny joke, Meester Bagman. "

"Joke?" Bagman repeats, bewildered. "No, no, not at all! Harry's name just came out of the Goblet of Fire!"

"But evidently zair 'as been a mistake," she says contemptuously to Bagman. "'E cannot compete. 'E is too young. 'E is a painter boy, to put 'im in the tournament would be 'orrific."

"Well…" Bagman says with an odd kind of smile, "as you know, the age restriction was only imposed this year as an extra safety measure. And as his name's come out of the goblet. . . I mean, I don't think there can be any ducking out at this stage. . . . It's down in the rules, you're obliged. . . Harry will just have to do the best he -"

The door behind them opens again, and in walks Professor Dumbledore, Mr. Crouch, Professor Karkaroff, Madame Maxime, Professor McGonagall, Professor Snape, and Griphook.

"Madame Maxime!" Fleur exclaims, striding over to her headmistress. "Zey are saying zat zis little boy is to compete also!"

Harry feels too shocked to say anything in defense of his stature.

"What is ze meaning of zis, Dumbly-dorr?" Madame Maxine says imperiously.

"I'd rather like to know that myself, Dumbledore," says Professor Karkaroff. "Two Hogwarts champions? I don't remember anyone telling me the host school is allowed two champions - or have I not read the rules carefully enough?"

"C'est impossible," said Madame Maxime, whose enormous hand with its many superb opals rests upon Fleur's shoulder. "'Ogwarts cannot 'ave two champions. It is most injust. "

"We were under the impression that your Age Line would keep out younger contestants, Dumbledore," says Karkaroff, steely smile in place, eyes colder than ever. "Otherwise, we would, of course, have brought along a wider selection of candidates from our own schools. "

"It's no one's fault but Potter's, Karkaroff," says Snape softly. His black eyes are alight with malice. "Don't go blaming Dumbledore for Potter's determination to break rules. He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here -"

Griphook interrupts, firmly, “Yes, thank you. I am trying to understand what exactly is happening here.”

Dumbledore nods. “I imagine we all are.”

“It’s obvious what happened,” Karkaroff says with a confused glance at the goblin, “the little delinquent and Dumbledore are in cahoots to give Hogwarts the competitive edge. Honestly, two champions to Madame Maxine’s and my one, it’s unthinkably dirty.”

Moody says, “I doubt Potter has the magic skill to get around the age line.”

Madame Maxine takes one look at Harry’s ashen face and softens. She asks, gently, “Meester Potter, did you enter yourself into the tournament?”

“I didn’t,” Harry says, “I promise.”

“I believe that,” Dumbledore says earnestly, “You are not a typical Gryffindor, my boy. Even so, I am afraid you must compete. Otherwise, you will lose your magic.”

Griphook looks at the assembled wizards with disgust. “The only way for someone to be entered into a magically binding contract without his or her explicit consent is if a guardian signs a contract on behalf of their ward.”

Snape snarls, “Black. It would be just like him to think he can get

around the rules.”

“Perhaps,” Griphook agrees evenly, “Or perhaps Harry was entered by anyone on staff from any of the three schools. Any person with the ability to take or give house points can be claimed to have temporary guardian status over any student. If Harry did not enter himself, it is obvious that an adult did so on his behalf.”

“That’s certainly… informative,” Dumbledore says. “And disquieting.”

“Convenient, eh?" Moody says.

"Convenient?" says Karkaroff. "I'm afraid I don't understand you, Moody. "

"Don't you?" says Moody quietly. "It's very simple, Karkaroff. Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out. Maybe someone's hoping Potter is going to die for it," says Moody, with the merest trace of a growl.

An extremely tense silence follows these words. Ludo Bagman, who is looking very anxious indeed, bounces nervously up and down on his feet and says, "Moody, old man. . . what a thing to say!"

“Is there any way I can get of this?” Harry asks Griphook.

“Actually,” Karkaroff says, “I was unsure of whether or not it was relevant, but why on earth is there a goblin here at all?”

“Potter has a contract with the Goblin Nation for his art,” Griphook answers with a nasty sort of grin, “And unlike Wizards, we goblins protect our own. To answer your question, Mr. Potter, while you need to ‘compete’ in the challenges, you don’t need to compete well. Based on my review of the contract, so long as you show up to the challenges and are judged, you will fulfill your requirements and keep your magic. I counsel you to simply sit down for thirty minutes and get scored zero for all your events. That will keep you the safest.”

“So all I need to do is show up and get judged poorly, lose, and I’ll be fine?” Harry clarifies.

“To the best of my knowledge, that is accurate,” Griphook responds.

Harry lets out a relieved sigh. “Right then, that’s what I’ll do.”

“Sensible,” Karkaroff says, “If that’s how you’re going to play it, I have no problem with you being in the tournament.”

“Nor I,” Madame Maxine says, “And I do ‘ope we find ‘ooever entered you.”

In another life, perhaps people might have been angry at Harry for being an illegitimate champion. Perhaps they might have yelled nasty things at him and made him feel like he was worth less than the Hufflepuff champion. In this life, Cedric yells at anyone who tries to start rumors of Harry being an attention-seeking brat and says, “He didn’t ask for this!”

In this life, Lucette knits Harry a good luck clover and gives him a sad smile.

In this life, when Harry is pulled from a potions class to go take photographs as a champion, he is known as an artist forced into something he does not want to do.

He enters a fairly small classroom with the desks pushed to one side. Fleur and Cedric are talking to one another and Krum is standing silently. A large man holding a camera is staring at Fleur.

Near Krum, Bagman is sitting on a chair but he sees Harry and strides forward. “Aha, Champion number four, no need to worry, this is just the wand weighing ceremony, the rest of the judges will be here soon--”

“Why are you weighing my wand?” Harry asks, feeling rather as though he would not like to part with his wand.

“Just to make sure all the wands are in order,” Bagman says, “We’ve got an expert but he’s talking with Dumbledore at the moment. “And then we’ll have a photoshoot,” he motions to a witch next to him in magenta robes, “This is Rita Skeeter and she’ll be covering the tournament in a little piece in the daily prophet…”

“I doubt it will be little, Ludo,” Rita corrects. Her hair curls in strong ringlets that seem to be at war with the features of her face.

“I wonder, might I grab Harry before we start?” She asks, training jeweled-spectacles on Harry, “He’s the youngest champion and I feel like talking with him might add a bit of… interest, shall we say, in the tournament.”

“Oh, of course!” Bagman says, “Harry doesn’t mind, does he?”

Harry says, “Actually if I could just head back to potions, that'd be great, because otherwise, Snape will--”

"Lovely," says Rita Skeeter. She grips Harry’s arm with crimson painted fingernails and steers him out of the room and to a nearby door. “Best to get away from the noise,” She says, “Right here will do just nicely, I think.”

Harry notices that he’s been guided into a broom cupboard.

Rita and her too-red lipstick and quick quills are ready as soon as Harry sits down in the dingy space.

“So tell me, Harry,” She says, “how does it feel to enter the Triwizard Tournament?”

“Like bad luck,” Harry says, “honestly I’m upset that I even have to compete at all.”

“Expand on that, will you?” Rita asks.

“Right, well because I didn’t enter myself —“

“Allegedly,” Rita says,

“Right, so I guess, I have to show up to the challenges and ‘compete,’ but I can basically just sit down for thirty minutes and get zeros and lose.”

“Is that your plan?” Rita asks. “To lose without fighting?”

“Yeah,” Harry says, “I guess.”

“Don’t you think some people would say that your parents would be ashamed of you?”

Harry stares at her. “What?” He feels like his head is rushing.

“It’s just, your parents are well-known for fighting, dear. Don’t you think some people might think that you’re spitting on their legacy by wasting your days with art?”

“Excuse me?” Harry asks.

“I mean no disrespect, just please answer the question for our readers. What would you say to those people?”

“Did you fight in the war?” Harry asks her. His voice is sharp and brittle. He feels, suddenly, that he is growing up. He can feel something settle in his bones, an anger that thrums beneath his skin far too old for his fourteen years.

Rita’s face pales. There is no way a woman like this, who builds her life telling the stories of other people, whose fingers are pale and soft and eyes shrewd yet unburdened, fought in the war. She is no warrior. “This is an interview for you, dear. Go on, answer the question. What do you say to people who believe that you are wasting your life doing something frivolous when your parents died to fight darkness. Do you

think you should be doing more to continue in their footsteps?"

Harry laughs and it is a terrible sound, one part anger to two parts grief. "Do you honestly think my parents fought and died so that I could spend my life surviving, barely, on the battlefield?"

Rita flinches as though she had not considered what she was implying in words so blunt.

"Because I don't," Harry continues, "I think my parents died hoping that I would have a future. My dad died hoping I would be able to get on a broom one day and fly around with the best of them. My mum died hoping that I would be able to go to Hogwarts and learn and make friends and not feel the sting of a label given to me because of my blood."

Harry pauses for a moment and looks at Rita with a critical eye. "How old are you?" He asks.

Rita says, "It's not polite to ask a woman her age, dear."

Harry shrugs, "Doesn't matter. Hermione told me you're forty-three."

Rita leans forward, "Would you say the two of you are in a relationship? I've heard from some of your classmates that the two of you are quite close. Or are you and Hermione perhaps in a relationship with Tom Black, all three of you?"

Harry ignores this question and says, "You're forty-three. My parents died -- were murdered -- sacrificed themselves, whatever you want to call it, when they were twenty-one. You've lived twice as long as they

did and I sincerely hope that you live at least twice as long again. Did they even know what they were fighting for? I'm not sure. But it sure as hell wasn't for me to die in a wizarding tournament. It sure as hell wasn't for me to lose my humanity becoming some kind of a warrior child. They wanted a world after the war was over -- you know, a world where children laugh and go to museums and adults read poems and have things to live for. There has to be a world when the war is over because otherwise what did we fight for? What did they *die* for?"

Rita's quill has stopped writing and she's looking at him with single-minded focus. "So what is it then that you are suggesting?"

"I make art," Harry says, "It's not something that heals broken bones or feeds hungry kids. It's just meant to be beautiful or evocative or change the way someone sees the world. I am making something that has no purpose but to be looked at which means that I am making something that creates space for things that are not inherently useful. My paintings and sculptures carve out time for people to learn they don't have to spend every single minute preparing for war and worrying about what happens if they lose."

Harry looks her in the eye and allows for a moment his careful walls to drop and lays his soul bare for her to see. His voice isn't loud and yet it reverberates through the small walls of the closet and out through the castle's stone. "**There is no fight bigger than this**."

Chapter End Notes

Well, Harry really said that. And he's getting a mastery in art. 0.0 Tom really cast an unforgivable. 0_0

Catch you soon, my lovelies.

Drop a kudos if you'd like, and/or leave a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void. (I worry.)

Dragonsong

Chapter Notes

Well heya, everyone. It's been a bit, but here I am!

Thanks to all of you who are still reading this even after 18 chapters. I had no idea this would blow up the way it has when I first started writing, and I am just so humbled by this experience.

I'll begin responding to the last chapter's comments later today. Thanks for all of them!

You are all the best!

Quick PSA: If you want your fanart included, email maytal.w.booth@gmail.com and it will be included

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This picture was created by Chrono Stasis. I really feel like it captures the loneliness of Tom's diary landscape and the magic Harry drew into life for him.

Not Harry. I won't let him die.

Tom is celebrating with all of his housemates when he hears Harry's name called from across the hall. Dumbledore is grasping a piece of burnt parchment in his hands and looking angry and disappointed and somber all at once.

Back when Tom was Tom Riddle and walking in the halls of Hogwarts during the height of the war with Griendwald, Dumbeldore wore that same expression many times. Tom has so many memories of hearing his auburn-haired professor asking, *accusing,* "Did you curse your classmates, Tom? Did you kill Hagrid's Kneazle, Tom?"

Tom would always deny such rumors, "I would never hurt a soul, professor. I find violence quite disgusting."

The old and white-haired Dumbeldore of this moment does not look determined to change the terrible tragedy unfolding in front of his very eyes. Just like Tom remembers, Dumbledore looks resigned to the situation. It's as if the man is spreading his hands and raising his eyes to the heavens, asking, "I know this is wrong, but what can I do?" Tom used to love that look, used to know that look meant Dumbledore would put his accusations away for some time, but now it fills him with a kind of righteous indignation.

"Do something," he wants to shout. " *Fight for your students. Protect the people you are sworn to protect. Do something, do anything, anything at all."*

But Tom knows Dumbledore better than most people. He certainly knows Dumbeldore better than Tom Black, the transfer student, ought to know the old wizard. So Tom disillusions himself and spells himself invisible, slipping between the angry and confused and still celebrating Hufflepuffs and trails Moody into the room with champions.

From his place in a shadowed corner, he watches in horror as Harry is forced to continue on with the tournament. He watches as only a goblin defends his artist. The teachers do nothing.

This is what the future looks like? Goblins are the defenders of wizards today? What happened to your ideals, Albus? What happened to your promises of a brighter tomorrow? Children were dying five decades ago. And you are now leading another child to his death.

Tom finds that for the first time since emerging from the diary, he cannot sleep. He winds his way up to the Astronomy tower and sits on a stone bench, watching the stars twinkle in the dark of midnight.

He cannot help but compare them to the stars Harry drew in the diary. These stars are far less beautiful and bright.

His hands are cold. In the diary, he was never warm, but never cold. The chill reminds him that he is painfully, *viscerally,* alive.

He hears footsteps behind him. “Beatrice,” he calls out, “I’m alright.”

A silky smooth voice replies, “I am afraid to inform you that I am not Miss Haywood, Mr. Black.”

Tom turns and sees Professor Snape in his billowing robes stride to the bench and then take a seat next to Tom, leaving a good deal of space between them. “I feel that I do not need to remind you it is quite prohibited for a student to be out of their dorms this late after hours.”

“I am aware,” Tom says, turning his attention back to the colourless and soulless stars.

“So then why,” Snape says, “Is it that I find you here, so very far from your doubtlessly shockingly flower-filled domicile?”

“I didn’t take you for the kind of professor who has heart-to-hearts with his students,” Tom replies.

Snape settles somewhat more comfortably on the bench. “An impressive non-answer,” he notes. “Shall I just take points and call it a night?”

Tom can’t bring himself to look away from the sky. It’s so different from the sky he grew to love, the sky he was gifted and that transformed his grey landscape into a place of magic. *Is it better living in the world Above,* he wonders, *or was I happier in the diary?* “If you like,” he agrees evenly.

“No,” Snape muses, “I do not think I should like to do that tonight.”

This seems out of character for the professor, but Tom cares little. “Alright,” he says.

Snape sighs once, deeply, and stands. He motions Tom do the same. “Come on now, Mr. Black, I’ll walk you back to your common room.”

Tom stands gracefully. “Alright then,” he says, “Thank you, Professor.”

Snape says nothing, merely sweeps away with the barest hint of a sneer. Tom follows. They walk in silence through the corridors. When they reach the barrels at the entrance of the Hufflepuff common room, Snape says, “You know, Mr. Black, it may be the case that I am not in the habit of exchanging tales of heartache with my students. I am, however, adept in the skill of listening. You may not be one of my Slytherins, but you are not altogether abysmal at potions. My door is open should you need it to be.”

The words all seem true, and yet there is an undercurrent to Snapes' offer, a thread of interest the potions master has not acknowledged. There's an energy to this offer that makes Tom think of Sirius.

"I remind you of someone, don't I?" Tom asks.

He can tell from the way Snape jolts that he is right. He hopes desperately that he does not remain Snape of Voldemort.

Snape's features seem to tighten. "You do," he agrees softly. "You are too perceptive for your own good."

"Who do I remind you of?" Tom asks in an equally soft voice.

"His name," Snape whispers, "was… Regulus."

So that's why you remind me of Sirius. In some ways, Tom is relieved that he does not remind Snape of the monster he became. But in many more ways, he feels cheated. Tom curls his lips so he does not shout, "I'm *Tom,* not Regulus, look at *me,* notice *me* " and enters his common room without speaking another word to the professor.

The common room is dimly lit. The fire is burning merrily and several children are running back and forth across the grass, leaving echoes of bright light. Beyond this, the common room is dark. Great gaping shadows climb the walls and fall in time with the crackle of the flames, causing the darkness to look like it is breathing.

The fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh years students seem to still be awake and are sprawled out across flower-laden couches, recliners, bean bag chairs, and hammocks. Cedric is sitting on the fluffiest blanket Tom has ever seen and Beatrice is swinging in a hammock. Hannah Abbot is lying down on a couch with her head in Susan Bones' lap.

There are a few quiet fireworks emanating throughout the common room that spell out things like, "Hufflepuff Champion," and "Go Cedric." There's also a lingering smell of butterbeer and something stronger — firewhisky, maybe.

It is clear that while Tom was sitting at the top of the astronomy tower, his housemates threw a party in Cedric's honor. There's an empty feeling in his stomach and he can't tell if that means he's disappointed or relieved to have been absent during the festivities.

"It seems I missed all the fun," Tom remarks.

Beatrice swings her legs down from her hammock. "Seems like it," She agrees. "It was a great party."

"Bravo, Cedric, couldn't be prouder," Tom says.

Cedric blushes and his lips curl in the barest hint of a truly pleased smile before he scratches the back of his neck. "Thanks." He coughs slightly. Tom feels like he had something he wanted to say, but can no longer remember what it was.

Beatrice cocks her head. "What's wrong, Tom?"

The empty feeling in Tom's stomach is growing to something resembling nausea. No one has ever asked Tom, "What's wrong?" Many things were wrong in the orphanage, and in Slytherin, and no one ever cared. *Harry* has never asked. Tom has spent his whole life in control of his relationships. He's never had friends or confidants. He's had followers and enemies.

I don't know what to say here.

He thinks he hates feeling this way. There's something unsettling about someone wanting to *know* him and *care* for him and ask him "*What's wrong*?" He's never had to answer the question before. He's afraid that if he begins to answer, he'll never stop.

Hannah Abbot does not raise her head but peers at Tom and then looks up at Beatrice, "I understand, Tom," she says. Tom's certain she does *not* understand but is trying to be on his side all the same. She gives him an excuse for what might be wrong, "We're all worried about Harry."

Susan nods, "The poor boy can never catch a break."

Tom looks out at all the Hufflepuffs. Some of them are small and silly and stupid. Some of them are large and silly and stupid (Zacharias Smith is certainly one of those.)

And yet… there's a level of ease to the house that Tom never saw in Slytherin. When he was fifteen years old, he had to fight for every scrap of respect he was given. He had to force his housemates to their knees before they would worship his power. The Hufflepuffs give him respect for free.

Tom is the only Slytherin in this house of badgers. He remembers

Dumbledore once pulling him into the transfiguration's professor office and saying, "You know, Tom, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

Tom has never shown weakness once in his life. If he wants the badgers to fight for him, he will need to be vulnerable. They will only respond to that. He takes a deep breath. "I need your help," he says to the assembled Hufflepuffs. "Will you help me?"

Hannah lifts her head and makes intense eye contact with Tom, "We're all a family here in Hufflepuff. We're stronger than the other houses give us credit for being."

Susan says, "And most of the time, we let them think that we're weak and small and in need of protection. But you are one of us, Tom. And we're not stupid."

Cedric grins, "Of course we'll all help you, Tom."

Tom can't help grinning back. *You may not be my knights, but that doesn't mean you won't fight for me. That doesn't mean I can't use you.*

So as the days progress and the first task looms ever closer, he and his housemates develop plans. The fourth years are likable, so they make friends with the foreign students and learn everything the other students know about the tournament. Who would suspect a Hufflepuff had any ulterior motives?

The fifth-years trail Karkaroff because he seems suspicious. The sixth-year students keep an eye on Moody because he's the newest professor. Their efforts at gleaning information largely go unnoticed. Flitwick remarks, "It's lovely to see the Hufflepuffs taking Defense so seriously."

The seventh-year students, Tom included, pour over books, look at every magical contract they can find, memorize the events from previous tournaments, and create handcrafted study guides for Cedric and Harry.

A month before the first task, Tom and Beatrice decide that Cedric and Harry need hands-on practice. Twice a week, Tom brings Harry into the Hufflepuff common room. His housemates delight in drilling Tom and Harry to prepare them for the tasks. Beatrice uses runes to make landmines on the common room floor. Susan Bones and Hannah Abbot make obstacle courses using charms and illusions. The Weasley twins make life-sized playing cards of exploding snap and Zacharis Smith yells, “How the fuck do you two keep getting here?”

The first time Tom takes Harry to a practice, Harry says, “Wait, I have homework. I can’t just leave Ron and Hermione! They’re waiting for me in the library.”

Tom curls his hand around Harry’s wrist, “They’ll survive.”

Harry is sullen that first practice day, but he slowly loses his glower after the Hufflepuffs feed him cookies and Cedric teaches him a simple healing spell, “epiksey.”

Cedric and Harry grow closer over the weeks of practicing together, even as Harry focuses more on defensive spells than offensive ones.

After about two weeks of practicing, Professor Sprout walks into the common room to see Harry casting a shield charm and Cedric transfiguring a rock into a golden retriever. Tom is off in one corner, hearing about how Karkaroff most likely has a dark mark from three fourth-year students, including one irate Ernie Macmillian.

She raises a brow. It is deeply forbidden for Harry to be getting this level of assistance from another house.

“So,” She says, calm as can be, “When were you going to ask for my help? And invite some more of Harry’s friends?”

Professor Sprout, quite against the tournament rules, begins to drill Harry and Cedric herself. The next week, Ron and Hermione join the practices. So does Ron’s little sister, the twins (in a more official and sanctioned capacity), and an odd assortment of other students.

When Tom catches a free moment, he spends it networking with the Slytherin students. They have connections and they recognize his power when they see it.

It helps that Tom’s been approached by several (all) of his professors about pursuing a mastery in their field. He's asked them all about Missy Damier though, and none of them have heard a single thing about her. It makes his heart beat strongly in his chest.

Flitwick tells him, “Damier? I don't think I've ever heard of her. Enough on that! You could have a real career in charms, with your talent.”

McGonagall, (He remembers when she was Minnie and full of acne and an indecipherable accent,) keeps him after class and says, “I never taught a Missy Damier. I would, however, be happy to write your recommendation for an apprenticeship in transfiguration.”

Moody and Tom develop a close sort of relationship after a practical demonstration involving the three unforgivable curses. Moody sees

Tom's response to the tortured spider, his dilated pupils, and excited flush, and invites him into his private office.

There, he encourages Tom to try out the three unforgivable curses himself. Tom does so, flawlessly of course. Moody pats him on the back, "Well done, lad, you'll make an excellent man with the right training. No need to spend your life at a scrivener's desk, eh?"

Indeed, Tom has received offers from half a dozen different professions already due to his excellent O.W.L scores. He knows after he aces his N.E.W.T.s he will be one of the most desired Wizards in Britain.

He allows little things to slip when he speaks to Gryffindors who feel bold enough to ask him for help, and to Draco, and so naturally, the whole school knows that Tom Black is the most advanced and powerful student to walk Hogwarts in at least five decades. There are whispers that he's even more powerful than Dumbledore.

The Slytherins notice the rumors and watch Tom with narrowed eyes.

He catches Nott after one dinner and calls him into an empty classroom.

"I'd like a book," Tom says. He doesn't ask what the book is worth to Nott. The boy will give his offer.

Nott raises a brow. "I'll give you any book in my family library in return for getting into your study group," the boy says. "The Hufflepuffs in fourth-year and up are suddenly at the top of their classes and I'm no idiot. Ron Weasley learned the Hufflepuff password and has become a transfiguration prodigy in the last two weeks. Something big is happening in your common room, and I want in."

Tom folds his arms across his chest, “I’ll need a vow that you won’t tell anyone about what may or may not happen in the common room. Or disclose the password that lets you in.”

“And if I refuse?”

Tom shrugs. “Then I don’t need a book.”

Nott’s eyes crinkle. “I’m impressed. Wouldn’t have expected that from a Hufflepuff. Fine, you have an accord.”

At the end of the week, Nott enters the common room and Tom has a dark tome about soul magic and immortality tucked into his robes.

Nott is faced with hatred for about two days before people warm up to him. He’s wicked with many hexes and even better at helping Patrick Bagby with potions homework.

“Crazy that not all Slytherins are bad, isn’t it?” Smith asks him, after learning about the Goblin Wars from Nott.

“Not so crazy,” Tom replies, “Not to me.”

Harry collapses next to Tom on a couch one Tuesday evening after working on his Protego for a long while. “I don’t see why I need all this practice. I’m not even really competing.”

Susan tuts like Harry is very stupid. “Even the best-laid plans are often corrupted. You can’t just rely on the possibility that nothing will go

wrong. You can't ignore the fundamentals. Hard work is the backbone to success."

"Sometimes the best offense is a good defense," Ron adds sagely.

Hermione looks askance at him. "Where on earth did you learn that saying?"

"My dad is a muggle studies expert, Hermione. I know lots of things."

Hermione rolls her eyes. "Right," She says. "How could I forget? It's not like you are the same boy who once told me that muggles use teeth as currency because they have such bad dental hygiene."

Ron says, "I promise you that there are some muggles, somewhere, that do use teeth as currency."

Tom ignores the both of them and focuses instead on Harry. "Come on now, darling, practice your Protego again."

Harry gives him a mulish sort of glare, and Tom resists the urge to curse someone out of the sheer anger he feels at Harry refusing to learn something that could potentially save his life.

"I'd rather not," Harry says.

"Now Harry," Tom repeats, voice hard and flat. People are beginning to stare and Harry seems to fold into himself.

“Fine,” Harry says, muttering the charm and his shield materializing with so much force, Ron and Hermione are knocked back a few steps. “There! Are you happy now?”

Tom gives Harry a bright smile. “I’m quite pleased, yes. Thank you, Harry.” Tom almost feels as if he should say, “Good boy.”

Harry does not respond nor look pleased and he continues to look put-out even as his shield withstands several spells thrown its way by several of the assembled students and Sprout.

A young Ravenclaw with blonde hair seems to materialize out of nowhere and begins throwing bottle caps at Harry which bounce off the shield.

“Oh,” she says in a vague sort of voice, “That’s very good. I don’t think the Dithering Bumblesporns will be able to bother you too badly when you use that charm. It’s a rather strong one.”

Beatrice pinches her nose bridge. “And when did we start inviting in Ravenclaws?”

Ginny Weasley, who managed to get her way into the meetings by virtue of having three brothers in the know, raises a sheepish hand. “She’s my friend,” she says by way of explanation. “Her name is Luna.”

Luna nods gravely, “It’s quite nice to have a friend who calls me by my name. Names are important. They say proper name use is an effective defense mechanism against Wrackspurts.”

It seems no one knows quite what to make of this, but Tom looks into Luna's misty eyes and determines that this tiny slip of a thing is speaking in a convoluted, but ultimately truthful kind of a way.

He hears someone cough, "That's Loony Lovegood for you." It sounded like Smith.

Tom's sure that Miss Lovegood heard but she just smiles and looks around with wide eyes.

Harry drops his shield charm and says scathingly to Tom, "Are we done for today?"

Tom is taken aback by Harry's tone. "Are you alright, darling?"

Harry gathers up his books, "Fine," he spits. He tears out of the common, leaving Ron and Hermione behind.

"Wonder what crawled up Potter's arse this time," Smith says. "I've never seen him like that."

"Hard to know," Cedric says with a very pointed look at Tom.

Tom sighs and follows after Harry.

Harry is walking past the paintings that litter the halls quickly. He turns and sees Tom shadowing him and speeds up.

Tom feels familiar anger rise up in his chest. He calls out, “Harry.”

Harry does not say anything and continues his march. “Harry,” Tom repeats. “Can you stop walking away?”

Harry continues to move down the hall. Tom runs a hand through his hair and then rushes forward. His legs are longer than Harry's, and even though his artist breaks into a run, Tom catches up quickly. He hooks one arm around Harry’s waist and pushes his artist’s back into the wall. Harry gasps and looks up at him, flushed and upset. His eyes are so very green.

“What’s wrong?” He asks Harry, with one hand curled around the boy’s throat and the other pinning him to the wall. “Why are you running away?”

Harry squirms and tries to break out of Tom’s grasp. “Let go of me,” he demands, squirming again. “Don’t touch me!”

Tom leans down until his nose is brushing Harry’s. Tom’s unnecessary glasses are in the way, he notes. “No,” he says, “Not until you tell me what’s going on.”

Harry tries to back away from Tom but because he’s against the wall, there’s nowhere for him to go. He realizes this and sags a bit in Tom’s grip.

“You’re so controlling,” Harry says, “Every little thing in my life is something you feel this -- this need to dictate. Let go of me!”

But Tom does not let go. He blinks once. And then, he is so angry it takes him by surprise. “I’m controlling? That’s your complaint? Without me, no one would be working to protect you in this fucking tournament. They’d all be calling you a liar and be belittling you as the little boy who got into the tournament by being the chosen one. You could show a bit of gratitude, Harry.”

Harry stares up at Tom defiantly. “I’m supposed to be grateful that you’re forcing me to -- to learn spells and flounce around in your common room like some kind of show pony? You made me wear contacts for the last two years, and you won’t tell me how to take off the mind guardians and -- and you always want to know where I am and what I’m doing and --”

“And you never say thank you for any of that, Harry. Do you have any idea how hard it was to get you your contacts, or how often I talk to the goblins to make sure your finances are in good hands, or how long it took for me to learn everything I needed to know about your mind guardians? Because I don’t think you do. You need to step up a little. All I want is for you to put in some of the hard work into your own life. I can’t live for you.”

Harry swallows, and Tom feels it with his hold around his artist’s throat. “I’m not asking you to do that for me.”

“And yet,” Tom says, “I spend so much time doing my absolute best to give you what you need.”

Harry starts struggling again. “You don’t know what I need. You never ask me what I want!”

“You never care about what *I* want!” Tom shouts. Harry flinches and hits the back of his head on the wall behind him. The feeling of emptiness in Tom’s stomach returns full force. He forces himself to let

go of Harry, and his darling shrinks into the stone but doesn't run.

Tom softens his voice, "You were raised by people who didn't care if you lived or died. I get that you're not used to someone caring about you, Harry, but I don't think you know how to ask for help, or how to say what you need. It scares me. I can't be the only person trying to keep you alive. You need to be that person."

Harry looks down at the floor. "It's so much sometimes. I don't -- I can't keep living like this with you."

Tom gathers Harry into a hug and Harry comes willingly. "Like what, sweetheart?"

"Like I'm some object you need to protect," he says into Tom's shirt, "I need to feel like I'm a person."

"You are a person, Harry, I know that," Tom says, "Trust me, I know that better than most people. I just worry about you, my darling. You need two people to waltz, but I feel like I've been dancing for the both of us."

Harry is silent for a long time. "I want to dance too," he finally says in a broken whisper. "I will, if you just let me."

Tom kisses the top of Harry's head, "I won't 'let' you do anything, Harry. That's something you need to do yourself."

***

After Tom and Harry's fight, Tom spends more time with the Slytherins and Harry spends more time with Hermione, Ron, and Cedric. Hagrid shows him that the first task will involve dragons, and Harry tells Cedric the same evening.

Gabriel Tate, a fifth-year prefect, has an uncle who knows a lot about dragons because he works on the Ligurian Dragon preservation. He owls his uncle who writes back several pages filled with necessary information about most dragons.

(Ron tries to ask Charlie for info, but Charlie says that would be cheating. Hufflepuffs are quite happy to cheat, it turns out. "Integrity is a Gryffindor thing," Beatrice tells Harry, "Us 'Puffs will do most things to help one another.'")

Lesley Toddington is a fearsome seventh-year muggleborn student, and she is pursuing a career in fire elemental magic. She's progressed to a place where she can consistently produce flames wandlessly.

Professor Sprout takes to fireproofing parts of the room and Toddington does her best to breathe fire in order to imitate dragons.

Harry and Cedric often end up singed and burned by the end of the night, but exhilarated all the same.

Moody constantly asks Harry if he has a plan, and Harry is tempted to say, "If only I could have just one plan. I think Susan, Beatrice, Justin, and Kousuke would bury me alive if I didn't have at least six different plans. Tom probably wants me to have no less than twelve unique plans."

Instead, Harry gives Moody a Luna-like smile and says, "I have a good enough of a plan to protect against the Dithering Bumblesporns, so I'm

not too concerned."

Moody stares down at Harry, glass eye going in all directions. "You're an odd one Potter, that's for sure. Just trust your instincts and focus on what you're good at."

There are three days until the first task, and Harry can feel the heightened pressure everywhere he goes in the castle. The Durmstrang students pass him quickly, as though breathing the same air as him is sickening. The Hogwarts students look at him as passes mournfully and offer him bits of mostly awful advice. Even Draco seems concerned about him.

The Beauxbatons' students seem to be treating him as a kind of mascot figure, and Lucette is asked to knit several more clovers for Harry's good luck by many of her classmates. Harry is seen by the French school as a kind of tragic fairytale.

None of this is helped by the morning's daily prophet, which is naturally dropped directly into Harry's porridge.

The title reads: *The Dark Side of Being the Boy-Who-Lived* by Rita Skeeter

"Oh no," Harry says, groaning at the title and handing his somewhat soiled paper to Hermione, "I don't want to read this."

Hermione says "Scourgify," and unrolls the now cleaned parchment.

Ron has his own copy and starts laughing immediately. "Mate, the beginning could not be better! She wrote, 'Members of Hogwarts, and

indeed the Wizarding World at large, were shocked to learn that a fourth person had been selected for the Triwizard tournament; one underaged Harry Potter.'"

"What, is she trying to make me look like I'm the picture of innocence or something?" Harry asks, leaning over to look at the paper in Hermione's hands. She calmly passes the paper back to him.

Harry looks down at the words.

The Dark Side of Being the Boy-Who-Lived

Rita Skeeter

Members of Hogwarts, and indeed the Wizarding World at large, were shocked to learn that a fourth person had been selected for the Triwizard tournament; one underaged Harry Potter.

For those readers who are not aware, this year the committee responsible for the tournament instituted a new rule that only wizards at or above the age of 17 could compete in the glory-bound tournament. This rule was instated following concerns raised by the high death counts of prior tournaments.

In what appeared to be a flagrant disregard for the rules, Harry Potter was selected as a second Hogwarts champion despite his being far too young to compete and the understanding that each school could only have one champion represent them. The fourteen-year-old chosen one joined the illustrious champions Cedric Diggory (Hogwarts, 17), Fleur Delacour (Beauxbatons, 17), and Viktor Krum (Durmstrang, 18) as an unprecedented fourth champion.

But what does this mean? Harry Potter is too young to participate in the

tournament. Surely, those who witnessed the event thought, there had been a mistake.

Indeed, Beauxbatons' champion Fleur Delacour was quite vocal about her concern and could be heard saying, blonde hair glowing with bioluminescence that would inspire the envy of any Aequorea Victoria, "Evidently there has been a mistake. He cannot compete. He is too young. He is a painter boy, to put him in the tournament would be horrific."

No one was as vocal as Harry Potter himself. The young boy, who is shorter than all three champions and most of his classmates, was heard saying as soon as his name was announced, "No, I didn't," and here he stuttered due to his nerves, repeating, "I didn't -- put my name in the cup. No, I don't want to compete. No!" His green eyes seemed like they were pleading with a higher power as a young boy felt the threat of losing his innocence in an adult's battleground.

But there was no way out for poor Mr. Potter. His potions professor, Severus Snape, at first claimed that it was clear Potter himself was acting and had entered into the tournament of his own volition, "He has been crossing lines ever since he arrived here." The dark-haired man quickly changed his tune when confronted with the fact that only a guardian of Mr. Potter could have placed the young child's name in the goblet. Indeed, any professor of any of the three schools (or even prefects) could have put Mr. Potter's name into the goblet. It seems a plot is afoot, ladies and gentlemen. At this point, Snape suggested that Sirius Black was responsible.

Why Sirius Black? Ever since he was infamously found innocent of the Potter's murder and freed from the fetters of his marred reputation, Sirius Black has been taking care of not only his nephew, the newly found Tom Black, but also his godson: Harry Potter.

The youngest potion master in history suggested that Black entered his godson into the tournament in order to "get around the rules." Legendary Auror Alastor Moody has a different take. "Someone put Potter's name in that goblet knowing he'd have to compete if it came out. Maybe someone's

hoping Potter is going to die for it."

This, dear readers, is quite the statement.

After doing some interviews, I learned of a far less frightening theory: Harry Potter entered his name into the tournament to promote his artwork across the continent. For those of you who were not aware, Harry Potter is an incredible painter and artist. His debut painting is currently held by the Malfoy family who allegedly could not pay Potter enough. In an interview, Narcissa Malfoy confided to me, piercing eyes reflecting the whole moon, "Mr. Potter's work is quite simply priceless."

By entering the tournament, Harry's name will be broadcasted throughout all of Europe. Perhaps he hopes to grow his business. However, the minister of magic, Cornelius Fudge, refuted this idea quite strongly. "Grow his business?" He gave a mocking sort of a laugh. "Come now," he said, "That boy has a waiting list at least three kilometers long. I should know, I've been on it since July."

Not only did the minister himself refute these claims, but so did the Goblin nation which is in a partnership with Mister Potter's business. "It is quite clear," a Goblin told me with rather pointed teeth, "That the issue, in this case, lies with Wizards being terribly unsuited to taking care of both their possessions and their young."

This, unfortunately, lends credence to the first and frightening theory: an adult entered Harry Potter into the Triwizard Tournament to murder him. This is an ingenious method of killing the young champion. Harry Potter, the brave little boy, will likely be no match for the tasks of the tournament.

Still, when I interviewed the small child myself, I learned that he is wise beyond his few years. When I asked him how he felt about being in the tournament, he confessed that he felt that it was unfair and he wished

someone would save him from his fate.

However, he told me with brilliant and piercing green eyes, he still wants to make the Wizarding world a better place despite all the danger he's been placed in over the course of his young life.

He said, "There has to be a world when the war is over, otherwise what did my parents fight for? What did they die for?"

Harry suggests fighting for a different kind of Wizarding world than the one we live in. He dreams of a world where little boys like him are not pushed into fights they cannot win and instead go to museums and look at art and have two living parents. When asked about the creation of that future, he said, "There is no fight bigger than this."

So, dear readers, I will do my best to uncover the plot against the chosen one, so that we can fight against the sweeping shadows of the present and deliver the boy-who-lived into a glorious bright future, one filled with life.

A lingering and terrifying question remains: who entered Mister Potter's name into the Goblet of Fire? This reporter hopes to find out.

Harry, as well as every person in the Great Hall, seems to be just about finished with reading the article. The Weasley twins are guffawing and Fred reads out, "'Come now, that boy has a waiting list at least three kilometers long. I should know, I've been on it since July,'"

George chuckles deeply and says, "Oh that's just class, good job Harry. Fuck the minister, am I right, or am I right?"

The Slytherins are all tittering about how Harry is a “brave little boy.”

“But why did I get younger over the course of the article?” Harry complains. “I am fourteen. I’m not a ‘small child.’”

Hermione looks over Ron’s shoulder. “I suppose she’s making a point. You are underage. She’s really driving that home.”

“Why would you drive home when you can just apparate? The Ford Angela is still roaming around in the Forbidden Forest. Driving seems terribly unsafe,” Ron says.

Hermione says, “And you wonder why I question your knowledge of muggles.”

“What,” Ron says, affronted, “Did I say something wrong?”

“Many things,” Hermione says, “Many, many things. You say so many things wrong.”

“Crazy how accurate she got what Fleur and Snape said, though,” Harry remarks, “It seems pretty word-for-word.”

Hermione hums thoughtfully. “Seems a bit too convenient to be a coincidence.”

“Maybe she has really good intuition,” Neville suggests. “I bet most reporters need that.”

“Maybe,” Hermione echoes.

Potions class is a disaster. Harry is distracted and forgets to add nettle to his cauldron which causes the potion to remain yellow instead of settling into a pale blue. Snape looks down at Harry’s work with a characteristic sneer.

“I do not know why I even allow such little boys into this class. This is a disgrace.” Snape waves his wand and vanishes the potion. “It would seem, that like the tournament, gaining even mediocre potions skill is a fight Mr. Potter simply cannot win.”

Ron flushes angrily and yells, “You see how easy it is to focus when your life's on the line!”

Snape’s face turns thunderous. “You think that Mr. Potter is the only person to have ever faced danger, do you?” Ron pales. “He is not. The world does not revolve around Mr. Potter as much as this school seems to. Five points from Gryffindor.”

The Slytherins all smile and Harry just sets his shoulders and begins his potion over again.

Hermione tells Ron, “It does no good to antagonize Professor Snape.”

Harry wakes up on the morning of the first task tired and hungry but feeling like food sounds like the absolute worst thing in the world. Harry manages to avoid speaking to anyone except for Tom until after lunch, which he chooses to eat alone in the kitchen. (He was

introduced to the kitchen by Poppy Caxton, a dark-skinned and incredibly cute first-year Hufflepuff.)

Before Harry enters the event tent for the Triwizard Tournament champions, Tom manages to catch him.

“Good luck, my darling. Remember all I’ve taught you.”

Harry is overcome with an odd impulse and grabs Tom’s tie in his fist. He stands up on his tip-toes and presses his lips to Tom’s cheek. “Thanks, Tom. I’ll try to make you proud.” He releases his hold on Tom and enters the tent before he can do anything truly stupid.

In the tent, Ludo Bagman and Crouch tell Harry, Fleur, Viktor, and Cedric that their task is to retrieve a golden egg from the clutch of nesting mother dragons.

Cedric and Harry, who studied the behaviors of nesting mothers, wince.

Each champion dips their hand into a bag Bagman holds and pulls out a miniature dragon with a number attached.

“Ah,” Bagman says, “Diggory will go first and will be facing a Swedish Short-Snout.”

The blue dragon, if Harry remembers correctly, can use its flame to incinerate bones. Cedric seems deeply shaken.

Fleur is to go second and face a Common Welsh Green, and Viktor

goes third to face a Chinese Fireball.

Harry selects the fourth dragon. He looks at his palm. “A Hungarian Horntail,” he says faintly, “Really?”

“Ach, but you’ll be alright, won’t you?” Bagman says.

Before Cedric goes out into the arena, Harry calls out to him and says, “You’ve got this, Diggory.”

Cedric wipes clearly sweaty palms on his robes and says, “Thanks, Potter. You just work on staying safe, yeah?”

“You got it.”

Cedric disappears into the arena and Harry sits back in the tent, listening to the roars of the crowd and wishing he didn’t have to be here.

Fleur goes out next, and then Krum leaves the tent. Harry sits alone and focuses on remembering the ins and out of his shield charm.

When Harry is called out into the arena, he’s managed to reach a level of acceptable calm.

“Here he is ladies and gentlemen,” Bagman announces, “The fourth champion! He’s to tackle the Horntail, and they’re known for being vicious --”

Harry casts his first charm. It's a noise muffler. He can still hear words if he strains, but it's easier to focus when he isn't listening to himself being made into a spectator sport.

Harry looks at the Hungarian Horntail who is several meters away from him. She is crouched protectively around her eggs, black wings scaled and glittering in the afternoon sun. She is terrifying and beautiful.

Harry sits down with his legs tucked underneath him and casts his shield charm. Then, he conjures some parchment and charcoal pencils.

The first stroke of his pencil against the parchment feels like a relief. Harry begins his drawing by trying to capture the might of the Hungarian Horntail's jaw. He sketches in the scales around the mouth and the sharp, snapping teeth. From there Harry moves on the great and fearsome head.

When he reaches the Horntail's eyes, he stares up at the dragon and into the bronze, cat-like eyes, and feels himself falling away.

He has great wings on his back. He's been taken from his home, forced to sleep, and he's woken up with a nest that is not nearly warm enough.

These humans are disrespectful terrors. He does not know if they will let him raise his children in peace once they hatch. He's angry, so very angry.

The humans have put a golden thing in amongst his eggs. It's not his egg -- it's not an egg at all. It will never hatch. He wants nothing to do

with the egg, but he thinks that this imposter of an egg must be important to the humans. It must be why he's been moved from his home, from the place he could hatch his eggs in peace. And he will not allow some wizard to come and try to take this golden thing from him. They would have to get too close to his real eggs, the ones that will hatch, and they might hurt his unborn children.

So he will sit here on this too cold nest and fight anyone who comes near him. He is a mother, and mothers protect their children.

Unbidden, Harry hears an echo of his own mother's voice, *It was worth everything.*

Harry tears himself out of the dragon's eyes and realizes his drawing almost entirely finished and that he is crying. He does not know how long has passed. He has flashes of a childhood with a mother that is certainly a dragon and an injury and being somewhere he was safe but where humans looked at him like he was nothing more than a common *animal,* and Harry knows that these memories are not his own.

He still can't help but stretch for a second, once he finishes the spikes on the dragon's tail, like he is a Hungarian Horntail.

This gains the Horntail's attention.

Words echo in his brain. *A trade.* The Hungarian Horntail is gazing at him with jeweled eyes and a spiked tail. He doesn't know how exactly he understands her, but he thinks that maybe dragons communicate with body language to one another. Perhaps that's why parselmouths can't understand them. Cats, Harry knows, only meow for the sake of humans. They communicate with one another non-verbally.

Harry does not move. The dragon shifts slightly. *A trade, hatchling. Your treasure for mine.*

Harry nods once, and the dragon settles on her haunches. Harry slowly and deliberately levitates his drawing of the Hungarian Horntail to where she sits on her nest.

The dragon observes him steadily, snorts once, and clasps the golden egg in her jaw before tossing it to Harry in a graceful ark. With the skills of a seeker, he plucks it neatly out of the air with both hands.

Harry finds himself sinking in a semi bow, with his head partially rotated toward the sky. He can tell this means something akin to "Thank you."

The Hungarian Horntail lifts her tail high into the air . *Good luck, hatchling.* Her tail comes down and wraps around her real eggs, and Harry is left holding a golden egg in his hands.

He stares at the dragon and sees a mother, desperate, lonely, and doing her absolute best to protect everything she loves despite being forced to perform.

He wonders if that's why she was so helpful to him. Dragons knew magic long before humans. Maybe she can also see souls. Perhaps that's what she saw in him: a boy, desperate, lonely, and doing his absolute best to protect everything he loves despite being forced to perform.

All in all, it takes Harry two and a half hours to get his egg, which is so far outside of the time limit, he is scored twos across the board save from Dumbledore, who gives him a very merry six.

The man says in the face of Karkaroff's intense glare, "That painting was a solid 20, my boy. Shame that the dragon took it." He wipes off a fake tear. "Terrible shame."

Harry finishes the day without a scratch. That night in the Gryffindor common room, Harry is paraded around and the golden egg is tossed this way and that.

Tom finds his way into the Gryffindor common room late and comes with confetti in his hair.

Harry walks right over to him and says, smiling wide, "I think I *talked* to the dragon today!"

Tom tries to give Harry an appropriately happy smile, but Harry can tell something is eating him up. "That's amazing, darling."

Tom looks tired and shaken. Harry puts his hand on Tom's forehead and checks for fever. Tom seems alright but he is a bit clammy.

Harry then asks something he's never asked Tom before, "What's wrong?"

Tom says nothing but looks pale.

And Harry can tell all of a sudden that Tom is holding himself back from answering because he's afraid if he starts, he'll never stop.

Chapter End Notes

Well, now Harry's asked. Stay tuned for the next chapter. It will be the Yule ball.

All named Hufflepuffs in this chapter appear in canon. If any are the wrong ages, please let me know. It's hard to find them, my dudes.

Please leave a comment or drop a kudos if you feel so inclined so I know I am not writing into the void.

Fool

Chapter Notes

> So we're back at the AAAH I CANNOT BELIEVE HOW AMAZING Y'ALL ARE stage of things. 10K kudos??????? I remember being excited about 10 K hits. What even is my life? AAAA I feel like I'm living in a fever dream. Also, y'all... in two days it will have been a year since I started writing this. Wut? Time flies I guess.
>
> This fic is going to have a birthday in two days. I have a family friend who is younger than this fic. Life is crazy my dudes.
>
> As always, thank you to everyone who reads this and leaves kudos and comments, I would not have made it this far without you.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Both of these heartbreakingly beautiful art pieces were made by @parfaeti

You got everything... and sometimes I hated you for it.
You got all the colors, and all the freckles, and all the charm
and all the magic and all the true love.
PARFAETI

Unbearably precious . That is the only thing Tom can think when Harry's lips press against his cheek. He can't remember if he's ever had anyone kiss his cheek before. Just a few weeks prior, he'd had his first forehead kiss from Sirius.

Harry, short but growing taller, slim shoulders, greener than jade eyes, curls his delicate and calloused hands around Tom's tie and takes — no, *gives,* what he wants. And then, when he pulls away, he turns and quickly disappears into the tent for the champions. He goes to a place Tom cannot follow.

Tom raises his left hand to the spot on his cheek where he can feel the phantom press of Harry's lips. He knows he must look like a fool. He can tell his cheeks have heated and that he's blushing.

The thought of someone like Harry dying in the tournament is all at once unbearable. When Tom enters the Hufflepuff seating section, he is anxious beyond belief. Even if he has faith in Harry's ability to protect himself, which is something Tom does not have, dragons are formidable opponents.

Fleur's inability to charm the dragon to sleep and Cedric's successfully transfigured dog do nothing to settle Tom's nerves.

"He'll be fine," Professor Sprout says.

"He's prepared as much as he can," Beatrice says.

"He's a child," Tom counters. "A child going against a dragon. All he can do may not be enough."

Susan Bones shoots Tom a kind of exasperated look, "You don't treat him like a child."

"Oh?" Tom says, "Then how do I treat him?"

Zacharias Smith snorts. "Like you own him."

Tom feels like he should be offended by the comment. Instead, he is filled with a sense of satisfaction. *I do own him, don't I?*

"Don't be ridiculous. Harry's his own person." Tom says if only to

keep up appearances.

Harry proves that he *is* his own person. He walks in front of the dragon with a straight back and fearless smile. He casts the shield charm Tom's drilled him on, *good boy,* and sketches the dragon out with charcoal.

He is *magnificent.*

Harry and the dragon make a trade… they communicate, and it seems the rest of the world hasn't really noticed. It's groundbreaking that Harry has managed to make a trade with the beast. No one else has ever done something like that before to Tom's knowledge.

Unbearably precious.

Cedric is in the lead at the end of the first task. Tom follows his fellow badgers away from the tournament and the tent where Harry is resting and into the Hufflepuff common room. Someone has thrown a party and there are banners hung up everywhere proudly declaring, "CEDRIC IS OUR CHAMPION AND WINNER"

Beatrice Haywood and a few of the other Hufflepuff women from the seventh year have managed to smuggle in some firewhisky. There's music playing and children are dancing on the grass. Light glows with every footfall.

When Cedric comes in, the cheers are absolutely deafening. Tom refuses to dance and makes his way to go up to one of the window seats. He stays above the festivities for a good half-hour, pondering how to get out of the party and finish a ritual to protect Harry. Cedric and Beatrice eventually call him away from his respite: "Get down here you maverick and join the party! Woooo!"

Tom descends the stairs quickly. He gets confetti in his hair. Cedric and Beatrice are lying down together on one of the couches.

"I think Cho's reaaaally pretty," Cedric slurs.

"She is," Beatrice agrees, "Those EYES."

"That hair."

"Mm. Yes. That hair. I just want to ROLL AROUND in it, you know?"

"I'm not much into women," Tom says as he stands over them.

Beatrice giggles, "Anyone with eyes woulda known that, Tommy-boy."

Tom wrinkles his nose at the pungent smell of firewhisky.

Cedric notices and asks, "What's wrong Tommy-boy? This issa celebration!"

Tom grimaces. *Sometimes a bit of truth makes the best lies.* "Sirius drinks too much. This is… a lot, I guess. Reminds me of when I have to take care of him."

This sobers Cedric and Beatrice who are looking at him in open concern. They sit up immediately.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Beatrice offers.

“No,” Tom says, “Cedric, I’m proud of you, and you deserve a party, but I think I need some space.”

Cedric nods. “I totally understand. Take care of yourself.”

Excuse made, Tom slips out of the common room with a book of soul magic tucked into his robes. With silent steps, he winds his way to the seventh floor. He paces three times and a door from his memories opens. He’s been coming to the come-and-go room for the last few weeks.

The book Nott gave him is dark enough (and rare enough), it includes a forgotten and banned method to make a charm that will save the life of a single person, no matter the circumstances, just once. It is called the Salvator Sequence.

The passage reads, “ *It is widely believed that the ruby gemstone bracelet Duchess Lucia wore daily saved her life from the killing curse in 1533. Reports indicate that Lucia used the soul of her sickly child, Leontes, to cast the Salvator Sequence. Leontes died in his eighteenth month of life. Duchess Lucia survived a killing curse cast by an insurgent in front of her court and was never attacked again. It is said her bracelet split into three parts. In order to make the charm, a normal object like a pendant must be imbued with the power of a soul piece. The easiest way to gain a soul piece is to trap the soul of a ghost (see page 4112) Ghost souls can only be siphoned during the summer equinox precisely halfway through the shortest night.*

Once casters have a soul fragment, they will then transfer it into whatever object they have selected by drawing the rune diagrammed below. The diagram must be drawn with the blood of whomever the pendant should protect. Beware, souls will fight back. Many have been cursed or killed in

their attempt to cast the Salvator Sequence. ”

Tom has enough of Harry’s blood to make the runic circle, but it is rather complicated. He’s spent the last three days drawing it. The circle looks less like a pentagram and more like an ellipse of butterfly and angel wings with designs of hemlock and nightshade creeping through every open space and filling in the shape. If one looks closely, they can see the individual runes that comprise the images of flowers and wings.

Tom finishes the final design: a collection of three red-poppies (all made by writing the Salvatore rune incredibly small) in the very center of the circle. He sits back, relieved. The circle is complete. Tom glances to one shelf to where, like always, the diadem Horcrux sits.

It yearns to communicate with Tom, but he’s ignored it. He hopes to speak with it so that the soul piece can choose on its own to become something to protect Harry. He’s wary of it, all the same.

Tom walks over to where the diadem rests on its shelf and plucks it in between two fingers. He takes it to the center of the runic circle and breathes for a moment.

There’s a magic buzzing in his mind. It invites him to come and speak.

Tom swallows and clasps his wand tightly in one palm. Then, he allows himself to sink inside the magic of the Horcrux which caresses him in seductive waves.

At first, there is only darkness. He blinks and his eyes adjust to a dim kind of room.

He is standing before a mirror. In the looking glass, he sees himself older and with red eyes.

“Tom.” The mirror greets with disdain.

“Horcrux.” Tom returns. The reflection sneers.

“I am more than a mere Horcrux. I am a piece of Lord Voldemort’s immortal soul.”

“Is that not a Horcrux?”

“You are the same as me.”

“You called me Tom. I doubt you would call yourself the same.”

“Oh? I suppose I would not stoop so low.” the Horcrux responds. Despite the facade of disinterest, the Horcrux is desperately confused and intrigued by Tom. It stares at him with hungry, malevolent eyes. “How is it that you can walk free?”

“For the same reason that I am here. Harry Potter. I ask that you willingly give yourself to him.”

The Horcrux dissolves into laughter. “Give myself to someone else? You are a fool. A *fool.”*

“And yet, I walk free,” Tom says. “It seems that you are more foolish than me.”

The Horcrux says, “ *Fool.* You should know I would do you no favor. Power, you stupid boy, is not freely given. It must be *taken.* ”

Tom says, “You don’t understand.”

“Then show me.” The Horcrux demands. “Show me what could make something of Lord Voldemort act in such a way.”

Tom pushes his memories at the Horcrux. He shows a grey world, his shadow Hogwarts. He shows years of isolation and desperation and numbing nothingness. He can tell that this makes the Horcrux shudder and pause. He senses images that are not from his own memories: images of dust and blackness and air so stale he can feel it hanging heavy on his skin.

I do understand, the Horcrux says. *But understanding changes nothing.*

“Doesn’t it?” Tom replies. He pushes more of his dilapidated orphanage at the Horcrux. And then, after decades of nothingness, there is a tree. Tom can hear the wind, smell the musk of sodden bark. This tree is powerful and new, and angry, and ... lonely. Like him.

Then there is a cupboard with spiders that are living and a fire that doesn’t burn and a little boy with eyes so green, it seems that spring eternal is held in each iris.

There is touch then, and warmth, and stars and glorious sunrises and boats and the moon so bright he needs to shield his eyes.

There's a dumb peacock the color of snow that follows after him like a puppy and begs for cuddles.

There's Harry, huddling in the leaky cauldron with his head in between his knees and crying. There's Harry, grinning at him from across the room as he paints the wall Gryffindor red.

There's his artist, in danger of dying in the tournament after painting a ferry that brings the dead to the underworld.

There's *Harry,* entwining one hand around Tom's tie and pulling him in for a kiss on his cheek.

Look at all that and tell me that he isn't worth everything.

The memories end. Tom stands in front of a mirror. His reflection, Voldemort's Horcrux, looks at him with pitied disgust. "You are a fool," it spits, "To have fallen in love with something so worthless."

Tom pulls himself out of the mindscape violently and discards the diadem in the runic circle. He pulls away as if burned.

His breaths are quick and shallow. He feels like his heart is being squeezed into a tiny box. The retort "it's not love," feels flat and empty in the face of a soul piece's -- something *just like him's* -- judgment and pity and hatred. He has been denied by something he could have been.

Tom reminds himself that the soul piece doesn't need to come willingly for the charm to work. Tom was foolish for thinking it would.

'No matter,' he tells himself, 'no matter that I feel loneliness creeping up my spine. Harry *is* worth it. I have no reason to feel lonely.'

The incantation for the Salvator Sequence is relatively short. When Tom is done speaking the words, the runic circle shivers and then draws up into a simple green emerald bracelet Tom has prepared. The diadem sits unharmed on a clean floor. The Horcrux that lived inside it for decades is gone. Tom can't even smell the blood.

Harry now has a second chance. He can die once and walk away alive and unbroken. The soul piece will die instead. Harry is safe. Tom's **succeeded**.

So why does it feel like I've lost?

***

" *What's wrong?"* Harry has the thought to ask. He looks terribly perfect like this, flushed, draped in gold and crimson, and joyful. He's just spoken to a dragon. Tom feels this creeping feeling.

Tom's dirty. It goes beyond the skin-deep grime of sweat and dust from the ritual. He can feel it: there's a darkness that rolls within him. If he were just slightly different, just another facet of who he is in this moment, he'd look at everything Harry's done and everything Harry is and say: "worthless."

And here is Harry, kind-hearted Harry, looking at Tom like he cares

for the older boy. He shouldn't. But Tom is not above using what he has offered to him.

Tom grimaces. "Nothing that will be better by talking about it. I got you a gift by the way. You deserve something to celebrate being the first person in living memory to communicate with a dragon."

Harry frowns. "I don't need anything, Tom. You've done enough for me. Too much, even."

Tom is not one to be deterred. Without speaking, he grasps one of Harry's arms, his left, and with long, nimble fingers slides the bracelet onto Harry's wrist. The emerald and golden details of the bracelet look like they belong with Harry's spotless complexion. Harry immediately looks wealthy, powerful, and... *beautiful.*

Tom rests his thumb under one of the gems and over Harry's pulse point. He feels Harry's blood pumping and breathes a sigh of relief. He knows that the power imbued in the bracelet will ensure that Harry's blood continues to flow. The gems of the bracelet pick up Harry's eyes in a way that is quite simply breathtaking.

"There," he murmurs, looking down at the bracelet and tracing the inside of Harry's wrist, "that looks just right."

Harry's gone very still and is turning steadily red. "Right," he squeaks. "That looks -- ahem -- really nice. Thank you, Tom. Really. Thank you."

A sudden impulse comes over Tom, and he raises Harry's hand to his lips, kissing the back of it. "Of course. It's my pleasure."

And with that, Tom makes his exit. He hopes Harry stares after him just like he stared after Harry when Harry kissed him on the cheek and disappeared into the tent.

I won't let you go somewhere I can't follow, Harry Potter. At least, not for long.

***

It's a simple Wednesday evening and Tom has been called to go and speak to the headmaster. He has several excuses lined up for any dark magic he might be accused of having done. He's fairly certain Dumbledore has no proof. If he got away with burning Rosier's owl alive, he feels like there's a solid chance he'll get away with sacrificing a small amount of already cut-off soul for Harry's life.

When he enters into the headmaster's office once more -- which is still garish and horrifically eccentric compared to how the office looked during Dippet's tenure -- he is surprised to see two chairs in front of the headmaster's desk. Cedric is sitting in one of them.

"Tom," Dumbledore says pleasantly, "Why don't you take a seat."

"Thank you, Professor," Tom says. He sits. He declines biscuits and tea. Cedric gladly accepts the offer of sweets. He and Dumbledore sip their tea and munch on their desserts quite happily.

Dumbledore clears his throat. "It has come to my attention that you, Mr. Diggory, have a great deal on your plate. Being a prefect with all of its duty walks hardly seems to be the best thing given the intensity of the tournament."

“It has its challenges, Headmaster, but I love being a prefect.”

“Oh, I am sure you do. And you are loved as well, Mr. Diggory, no mistake about that. It just seems to me that you might benefit from, say, sharing the responsibilities.”

“With me, you mean,” Tom says.

“Oh yes,” Dumbledore says with a gleam in his shockingly blue eyes, “To be frank with the both of you, if Tom had come when he was eleven, I quite imagine that he’d have been head boy in his seventh year. It seems too bad that you should graduate without experiencing being so much as a prefect. So I thought, why not feed two birds with one watermelon? Cedric, if you would be amenable, I could make Tom a prefect in addition to you, and he could take on your duty-walks and whatever other privileges you cannot reasonably manage.”

Cedric takes another bite of biscuit and chews it slowly before swallowing. “But I’d get to stay a prefect, right?”

Dumbledore nods. “It is not something I would take away from you. I am far more likely to take your socks. One can never have too many socks.”

“They really can’t,” Cedric agrees. “That sounds good to me. Thank you, Professor.”

Tom looks at both wizards who seem rather smug and self-congratulatory. “Are either of you going to ask me what I want?”

Dumbeldore claps his hands together, “What a good point. Thank you, Tom. I would have been terribly overbearing if I hadn’t thought to ask you about your opinion. How forgetful I seem to be getting. So Tom,

allow me to ask: would you care to be a prefect?"

Tom looks at Dumbledore and Cedric and feels so out of his depth that he finds himself answering, curtly, "Yes, thank you."

With a month to Yule, the transfer student Tom Black begins to wear a prefect badge.

***

Harry has a problem. He is not good at dancing. He needs to be good at dancing, however, because McGonagall has told him that he must perform well at the Yule ball.

("Mr. Potter," she'd said, green eyes flashing as though with sparks, "I cannot hope to impress upon you just how important this ball is for the champions, but I will say this: you had better learn to dance as best as you can and bring a date. I demand it, in fact."

"Erm."

"Yes, good, that's settled then.")

Dancing lessons have in fact gone so poorly, Harry feels like the whole thing is quite hopeless. He complains to Hermione about just how abysmal he is. She takes it personally and decides that she must teach him dancing.

This is how Harry finds himself waltzing (stumbling) about the

Gryffindor common room with Hermione in his arms.

"I don't understand how someone with such a great eye for beauty can be so bad at dancing," Hermione complains. Harry has his hands wrapped around her waist and she has her hands on her shoulders. Even so, she's clearly been leading him for the last few minutes. Their waltz around the Gryffindor common room has caused a great deal of laughter. Ron is sitting with Ginny and looks like he's run a marathon from how much he's been guffawing at Harry's obvious lack of talent.

"Well, gee 'Mione, maybe it's because I'm always paired with Ron in dancing lessons. He has two left feet and he's taller than me. He always leads."

"Oy," Ron yells, "I'm better than you, mate. If you led me, we'd both just fall."

Hermione immediately stops dancing and Harry trips over her feet. "That's it!" She says. "I've been so stupid. There's no reason for me to teach you how to lead because you won't lead."

"Why won't I lead?" Harry asks.

"Were you planning on asking a girl to the ball?" She asks.

"I dunno. I haven't thought about it."

Hermione doesn't seem to consider the words important. "Of course you haven't." She turns to look at the Gryffindors in the room. "Who do we know who's a man who can teach Harry to dance well?"

“Bet you Malfoy can dance, the absolute tosser,” Ginny supplies. “Seems like a pureblood sort of a thing.”

“You’re a pureblood,” Neville says to Ginny.

“Same as you. But neither of us can dance or burn a Yule log, now can we?” She responds.

Harry says, “That’s not a bad idea, actually. Draco seems like he’d get a kick out of making fun of me.”

“Don’t we all?” Ron says. Hermione glares at Ron.

“Ask him,” Neville says. “What’s the worst thing he can do? Laugh?”

Harry nods. “Right. I’ll just ask Draco to teach me to dance then. Nothing can go wrong.”

Harry hears someone whisper, “Why can’t he ask Tom?” But they’re immediately shushed.

The next afternoon after potions, Harry grabs onto Draco’s wrist. Draco looks at him in complete surprise.

“Potter, what can I do for you?”

“Do you know how to dance?” Harry asks. Hermione gives Harry a not-so-subtle thumbs up from where she's waiting up the hall.

“Do I know how to dance?” Draco says haughtily. “I’m one of the best dancers in our generation. Yes, Potter, I can dance.”

“Well, that’s good. Impressive. Wow. Shocked, I am. Erm. Do you think you’d be able to teach me how to dance?”

“Dancing’s not hard. You just put one foot in front of the other and follow the counts. Monkeys can do it. It’s not arithmancy.”

“Maybe not for you, but not all of us were raised from the cradle to be cultured. I’m asking you for help. Will you?”

Draco looks down at Harry with silver eyes and a bemused expression. “Sure.” He lays a hand on Harry’s collarbone and traces the mind guardians through the fabric of Harry’s robes. “You’re practically part of the family. The black sheep to be sure, but still a member of the house.”

Dance lessons with Draco begin terribly. He comes into the common room and faces a great deal of verbal abuse that he returns with a vengeance.

(“Get away, filthy death eater spawn!”

“What an imaginative insult. Never heard that one before. As always, it concerns me that the best and brightest of the Gryffindors are capable of reproduction. I predict your contributions to the gene pool will lower the collective I.Q. of wizards by at least four points.”

“Better than being an inbred incestuous child.”

“Oh, come on now, you can do better than that.”)

Draco remains unflappable in the face of obvious hatred. He places one hand on Harry’s shoulder and the other on his waist.

“What a handsome bracelet,” Draco remarks when he sees Harry’s emerald bracelet.

Harry goes bright red as he remembers Tom kissing the back of his hand. “Oh, um, thank you. Tom gave it to me.”

Draco’s eyes narrow. “Black did? Hmm. Well, enough dilly-dallying. Follow my lead, Potter. It shouldn’t be too difficult.”

As soon as Draco starts trying to teach Harry to dance, the Gryffindors decide he’s too amusing to be upset with. He is only in his fourth year. He’s hardly a criminal.

(“I mean look at him, he’s getting his toes stepped on every five seconds. Poor thing.”)

“Merlin, you weren’t joking about needing help.” Malfoy winces as Harry accidentally kicks his shin. “How are you this terrible? It’s an embarrassment.”

“More helping, less belittling please.”

They twirl around for a few more passes of the common room.

“Stop fighting me, Potter. Just GLIDE DAMNIT.”

“I CAN’T.”

“Yes, you CAN. Just LISTEN to ME!”

When Harry steps on Draco’s toes for the sixth time, he releases Harry and backs up a few steps. “NO!” He shouts. “I CANNOT do this. Why? WhY? You are horrifying. I need an example to show you what it should be like. You can — just watch for a moment, if that’s acceptable? I can’t keep dancing with you if it’s always going to be like this.”

“Sorry,” Harry says, “I told you I was dreadful.”

“Understatement, Potter,” Draco mutters. He looks out at all the laughing Gryffindors who’ve congregated to watch him try and teach Harry how to dance.

“Girl Weasley,” He calls out. Ginny looks up at him with anger.

“Just Weasley is fine, Malfoy,” She corrects.

“There are four Weasleys just like you in this one room. You’re Girl

Weasley to me. Come here."

"Why?" She asks. She does not rise from the couch.

"I'm going to use you to teach Harry a good example of dancing. You want to help him, don't you?"

"Sure, I'll help Harry," Ginny drawls, "but I hope you know that I find you repulsive."

"Mutual, I'm sure," Draco responds. Ginny comes over and puts her hands on Draco's shoulders. She's about Harry's height, so a head or so shorter than the Slytherin. Her red hair is pulled up in a ponytail and her brown eyes are narrowed and framed by dark lashes.

Draco's shoulders are broader than hers and his jaw is sharper. "There now, do you know how to waltz?"

Ginny stomps on Draco's toes. "No better than Harry." She says sweetly.

Draco rolls his eyes and enchants the music to begin playing. "I doubt that. No one is as terrible as that one."

Ginny truly does not have any dance experience. When she and Draco begin to dance, she is shaky on her legs. Her robes swish about her narrow frame and her ankles keep getting twisted.

"Breathe," Draco instructs.

“I *know* how to *breathe*, Malfoy,” Ginny growls. She takes a breath regardless.

“Dancing is just like walking with a bit of extra elegance,” Malfoy says.

“Like walking, huh?” Ginny repeats. "What kind of walking have you been doing?"

By the third minute of practice, it’s clear that Ginny has started to figure the whole waltzing thing out. There’s a lightness in her step and magnetism to her dance.

Within ten minutes of the practice, she and Draco are moving perfectly in sync. It almost seems like they are floating and orbiting one another. Whenever Ginny spins away, Draco is always keeping time and he makes sure to place his hand back on her waist as soon as she returns.

“There you go,” Draco murmurs.

Harry watches how Ginny moves her feet. He watches how she keeps her one hand clasped around Draco’s hand and how she holds onto his shoulder.

When the music ends, Ginny and Draco pull apart flushed and panting.

“See now, Potter, that’s how it’s done.” Draco says.

Ginny tosses her hair and her ponytail smacks Draco in the face. “He was only good because he was dancing with me. Not sure if Malfoy has any talent.”

She walks away. Draco sputters, “I’ll have you know, girl Weasley, that I’m the best dancer of our generation.”

“Oh shove off, Malfoy,” Fred says.

“You’re not impressing anyone.” George agrees.

Draco ignores them and holds out his hand to Harry. “Potter. Let’s see if you learned anything.”

When Harry begins to dance with Draco, he tries to remember how Ginny danced. He stumbles less and there’s a single moment where everything clicks, and then Draco says, surprised, “You have improved.”

“Thanks,” Harry says. He’s grinning. Dancing isn’t so bad after all. Harry could imagine doing this every night. His partner would have to be a bit taller than Draco. Maybe not so blonde either. Black hair could be nice. Blue eyes, dark like a storming sea. Someone who looks a lot like… Tom.

Oh.

Oh, no.

I don't love Tom like a brother. I love him like my dad loved my mum.

Harry stops dancing.

“What’s wrong? You were doing well.” Draco says.

“I’m just done for tonight,” Harry says. “Thank you, though.”

Draco says, “No worries. Wouldn’t want you to embarrass the family.”

***

The bracelet Harry wears feels warm. It pulses sometimes, like it is alive. Harry almost asks Tom why it feels so...animated, but he thinks that maybe he doesn’t want to know.

Tom’s been absent and angry ever since Harry told him he doesn’t know who he’ll be taking the Yule ball.

He’d said, cuddled into Tom’s bed in the Hufflepuff dorms, “I dunno, really. I guess whoever asks me first.”

Tom had abruptly pushed Harry away. “So anyone will do, is that it?”

“Well, I’m just not sure if I fancy anyone, that’s all,” Harry had replied. (He hadn’t said he fancied Tom. Rejection seems awfully scary.)

Tom hasn't spoken to him much since.

Harry's taken to touching the bracelet in Tom's absence. He imagines all the things he'd say to Tom if only he were braver. And when he does, sometimes, the bracelet seems to be trying to say something back.

Harry's running a finger along the emeralds of the bracelet during breakfast on Sunday two weeks before the Yule ball. Hermione is sitting at the Hufflepuff table and seems to be yelling at Tom.

"What's that about, d'you reckon?" Ron asks, mouth full of toast.

"Could be anything. Do you think Tom will ask Hermione to the dance?"

Ron snorts. "Hermione? Nah, man. She's not much to look at, is she? I mean all that hair and those eyes and her cheekbones and everything. Not much at all. Ehem. Besides, I asked her if she was going with anyone a couple of days ago when you were with Tom, and she said someone already asked her."

"That someone could have been Tom, though."

"Not bloody likely," Ron mutters.

When the news is dropped down from the sky, Harry receives a thick and stately envelope from the goblin nation.

He is told that he must produce a painting by the end of the month for the Lenoir family in France. They are apparently relatives of the Malfoy family and have offered Harry 10,000 galleons.

" *Don't worry,"* the letter tells Harry, *"The prices will only increase from here. As per our agreement, we will take 5 % of your profits on all art sold so you will be left with 9,500 galleons. We already have a few bids for your next pieces. Get on it, Mister Potter. Business calls."*

"HOLY HELL! ***10,000*** GALLEONS. YOU'VE GOT TO BE FUCKING KIDDING ME!" Ron explodes.

"Ron! 10 points from Gryffindor for foul language," McGonagall yells.

"It's so much money…" Harry says, "So much."

"Well, that's proof if nothing else is that Harry has no reason to enter the tournament," Neville says.

"Yeah, who would've thought Potter could make the 1,000 Galleons winnings look like petty-anti," Fred Weasley agrees faintly.

"Shh!" Harry says. "Do you want people to start accosting me for money?"

"OOh, accost! A good word, Harry." George says.

"Your secret is safe with us but I'm pretty sure Seamus heard, so who

knows if the secret will be safe…" Fred says.

(Seamus did hear Ron say that Harry was getting paid 10,000 galleons. He just did not believe it. He still doesn't, in fact. Who pays so much money for a painting? Even a good one isn't worth that much. What a waste.)

Harry feels a little bit like someone has pressed sunlight into his hands when he goes to begin his painting. He's ten feet taller. He's worth something -- worth quite a lot of something -- to a random family in France. They have no reason to venerate him as the savior of the wizarding world. They just want him to make art.

Harry is in the art room as soon as classes are out. He first paints his white canvas over in a blue so dark it is almost black. The paint has a subtle sparkle to it -- it catches the light in a thousand different places. On the dark blue background, he adds stars so bright they appear like molten diamonds in the night sky. He fashions the milky way galaxy out of what appears to be a curtain of luminescent white chiffon.

Harry doesn't turn in a transfiguration essay. McGonagall tells him to make it up after he finishes his painting. He barely hears her.

("Harry gets really out of it whenever he's in the zone of painting, doesn't he?" Someone in Slytherin says. It might be Nott.

"Guess that's one of the prices of being a genius." That might be Zabini

"D'you really think he's a genius?"

"What else would you call him?"

“A fool.”)

With the night sky in the background, Harry creates the sea. Blue and black and green waves crash and crest, cold foam reaching to the corners of the canvas and spilling down the edges. He takes dark brown and builds an island. On the island, he places dark rocks and crimson flowers peeking up through broken dirt.

He gets a smear of red on his cheek. He doesn’t wipe it off.

(In class, Snape tells him that he’s hopelessly distracted. Even so, Harry accidentally brews a perfect potion.

Snape stares at him evenly. “Is there a reason you are better at potions when you are in the midst of one of your ‘little projects?’”

“I dunno sir. I think that maybe things are just starting to click.”

“Starting to click, hmm? Potions don’t just ‘click,’ Mr. Potter. I will expect this standard from you going forward.”

“Yes, sir.”

Snape mutters as Harry heads to exit the classroom, “He looks too much like Lily without his spectacles.”

Harry barely hears him.)

On the island, Harry paints a volcano tall and vicious. With steady hands, he crafts the lava. Bright spurts of reddish-orange fire pour down the volcano in waves so very unlike those in the sea. The air shimmers from the heat of the magma. The lava cascades over the island, taking down flowers and trees and destroying everything in its path.

When it reaches the water, the lava pours itself into the ocean, and great clouds of steam rise high into the air. Harry can hear the sound of it if he strains.

Harry knows somehow that the lava in the painting will stop flowing in a few years. There will be no life on the island when the eruption ends. All there will be is an expanse of black rock, the faint scent of salt, and the dark sea crashing against jagged shores.

But in about seventy or so years, perhaps the painting will show a mountain on a large island and grass that's beginning to grow. Perhaps there will be green bushes and red flowers, poking up through hardened rock. Perhaps in two centuries, there will be an island teeming with life and molten magma rolling hidden beneath its surface, lying in wait.

Harry titles the painting, *Forged in Fire*.

Harry is rather hungry all at once when he finishes the painting. He looks up at the clock in the art room and sees that it is dinner time. He makes his way to the great hall with a smile that comes with a job well done.

As soon as he enters the hall, he feels everyone's eyes on him. At first, he can't figure out why, but it's nothing new for people to look at him. He is the boy-who-lived.

Then Harry sees Tom walking toward him with a deliberateness he hasn't seen since that terrible day in the courtyard of his inheritance. Harry's heart begins to beat wildly.

Tom stops in front of Harry and they're toe-to-toe. "Tom," Harry greets, "How are you? We haven't spoken in a bit, but I uh, I missed you." Harry looks up at Tom with a vulnerable, wide-eyed sort of look.

Tom gazes down at the Gryffindor with an inscrutable expression. "I missed you as well. I shouldn't have left you alone, that was stupid of me. There was no reason for me to get upset: you're taking me to the Yule ball," he declares.

Harry barely has time to say "What am I doing?" and then Tom is cupping one hand behind Harry's head and gently guiding him forward. Before Harry can really understand what's happening, he's being kissed. Harry's mind blanks and his eyes close. He feels hot, velvet soft opening lips against his own. Tom presses his mouth to Harry's so hard that Harry can feel the imprint of teeth on his bottom lip and taste the peppermint and cherry on Tom's tongue.

And then all at once, Harry finds that his mouth is opening and he's doing his best to give back what he's getting from Tom.

It's warm and electric and Harry has tingles spreading from the top of his head in a waterfall down his spine. He feels like he is on fire and he never wants to stop burning.

He's kissing me kissing me he's kissing me. I've never been kissed and Tom's kissing me this is my first kiss he's kissing me and I like it actually, quite a bit really, kissing me…

Tom groans and then presses an open-mouthed kiss to Harry's lips once, twice, and then pulls back. A thin string of saliva trails between his mouth and Harry's before snapping and falling to the stone floor. Tom's hand does not leave the back of Harry's head.

The older boy's hair is tousled and he looks inordinately pleased with himself. Harry notices there's a smear of red paint on Tom's face, just below his right eye. "You are taking *me* to the Yule Ball, Harry Potter," Tom repeats, almost teasing. "And I'm taking you. That's all you need to know."

And then he leans down, and kisses Harry again.

Chapter End Notes

Was this a slow burn? Depends on how you count. But if you felt like this was a slow burn, the slow is finally over. They've kissed! Now I can answer comments from eons ago when people were like, "Are they ever going to kiss, will they ever kiss?" with "Yes, see chapter 20." BAHAHAHAHAHAHA I'm living my best life. They were supposed to kiss back in chapter 17 bc I originally thought my chapters were going to be waaaay shorter than they are now. I thought the third task would hit in chapter 20 in my OG very unrealistic outline. Remember chapter one? Go back and look at it if you want. It's so short. What was I doing then? What am I doing now?

Anywho -- long ramble aside, thanks for reading! Leave a kudos if you feel so inclined. (With just about 200 more, I'll move onto the first page of Harry Potter/Tom Riddle works if people filter by kudos. That would be SO cool. But don't worry about it. What will be will be. I'm just glad you're here)

Please leave a comment so I know I am not writing in the void. Or if I am, let me know that the void isn't so lonely after all.

Plasticity

Chapter Notes

I'm back, y'all. Sorry about the delay on this chapter. I ended up moving back to university housing and I have Celiac and they fully failed to feed me for about three days so it's been a whole thing and then I decided to take seven classes because I'm stupid, but now I'm down to six like a regular over-achiever instead of someone with a death wish and I finally had the time to finish this for y'all. My schedule is more open so updates will start coming around back at that (hopefully) twice a month rate. The next fic I update will be my other fic, "harry potter and the immortals playground," but I'll be back to this one hopefully before Septermber ends.

I will begin responding to comments from chapter 20 tomorrow.

Thanks for putting up with me!

PSA/Trigger Warning: This chapter includes some discussions of suicide. No one considers hurting themselves, but is discussed

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This beautiful image is Chrono Stasis' take on "Forged in Fire." I stand and sit in awe of the talent displayed here.

Is it possible to exist in stagnance for eternity? Is it possible to spend every waking moment with someone and not grow to feel great emotions toward them? If the opposite of hatred is indifference and not love, was apathy ever an option?

The rain is falling outside the window and onto the ground in great splattering tear-drops. It's cold inside the abandoned classroom he's sitting in and he almost wishes he was wearing his mink cloak underneath the school robes.

Ginny is sitting across from him. She's more than a meter from where he rests with his back against the wall. She leans against the edge of something that was once a respectable desk. Her red hair is spilling down her shoulders and providing the only color Draco can see in the otherwise grey and shadow-filled room. He used to pretend that he wasn't looking at her, but he's since learned that he's allowed to look his fill in these moments.

She stares at him right back. Her brown eyes seem worn down. They always do whenever Draco allows himself to see past the blustering facade of the youngest Weasley.

"I was possessed by Tom my first year."

The words pass Draco by as though they are spoken from across a distant fantasy. These moments with Ginny always feel that way — visible and memorable but only in the barest of ways. It's as if the two of them exist together at the very boundary of reality. If they ever say the wrong thing, or are seen by someone else, the whole thing will shatter and become nothing more than an odd and shared fever dream. He feels almost like they're in a raindrop and everything around them is muted. It will all come to an end when they crash into

the ground.

"How?" Draco asks.

"Through a black leather diary, I think." Ginny says. "I can't prove it of course. But I still remember his elegant handwriting sweeping across a blank page and telling me everything I wanted to hear. And then I have these memories of like a void…or like this emptiness, and I'd wake up with blood on my robes and feathers in my hair and not know where I was. I'd just have this feeling crawling up my spine like I'd done something terrible. So I'd write to Tom in the diary and then he'd make me feel better. It was like he could make everything bad go away. And then… I guess I started to think that maybe he was what was making everything go wrong. And then Harry found the diary. And then Harry came back to Hogwarts with a boy who has elegant handwriting and who is named Tom and I just… I just think. I think it must have been him."

Draco remembers seeing a black diary once in his father's private library when he was seven and exploring the house. He'd gone to open the leather cover and his father had appeared in the doorway immediately, face as angry as Draco could ever remember.

He'd smacked Draco's hand away from the little black bound book with his cane before Draco could touch it and thundered, "You are never to open this book or so much as breathe near it for the rest of your life. Do you understand me, Draco?"

Draco nodded and said, "Yes, Father."

It took him years to identify that his father had been not only furious but also terrified.

“My father once locked me out of the manor overnight in December because I forgot to read an essay on the best methods for wealth management. He did not allow me to wear anything other than silk pajamas and it was freezing outside. I was eight.”

Ginny laughs a short little laugh. “What was that? You don’t have anything else to ask about the whole ‘Tom possessed me’ thing?”

Draco shrugs and counts the freckles on Ginny’s face. She has thirty-nine today. She had twenty-four the third time they danced in the Gryffindor common room to teach Harry what dancing should look like. They didn’t have an excuse for why they were dancing together the fourth time because by then Harry was good at dancing. So then they had to dance together a fifth time in secret and then it just sort of turned into a twice a week kind of thing.

Draco decides, “I wanted to share something hard that happened to me too. I don’t really want to know more about the diary. We can’t change the past and it’s not like I’m going to be telling this to anyone.”

Ginny bites her lip. “You won’t? I feel like it would be super useful to tell this to all your Slytherin friends.”

Draco feels inexplicably hurt for some reason. “What? Is that why you think I’m here? So I can just betray you and get you to tell me all your secrets so I can be the best gossip in fourth year?”

Ginny says, “Well you are a Malfoy,” as though this explains everything.

“And you’re girl Weasley. Shall I also tell you that you have brown eyes? Or that your hair is red? Are we just stating the obvious now?”

“Don’t be a prat, Malfoy.”

“There’s nothing else I can be.”

“I hate you,” She says, but there’s a lightness to her eyes.

Draco gives her a mock salute. “Mutual, I’m sure. I thought we were done stating the obvious.”

They fall into an uneasy silence and listen to the rain *plink-plink-plinking* outside the window. Draco curls his fingers into his palms.

“I’m sorry,” she says at last, “It’s the first time I’ve ever said it aloud.”

Draco still feels hurt and the words come out without his permission, “That you hate me? No, you’ve said that many times before, I assure you.”

Too many emotions to count pass across Ginny’s face before her eyes harden. “I suppose I have,” she says. Her voice is cold. Then she stands up, grabs her bag, and leaves the room without another word. It feels empty as soon as she leaves.

Draco stays. He takes off his crystal watch and hurls it at the wall. In less than a minute it is back on his wrist. Stupid anti-loss charms.

He leans his head back against the stone wall and whispers the words

he'd wished he'd said, "I know. I'm sorry too."

The rain is getting heavier. Draco stares listlessly out the windows and wonders when these moments with Ginny began to feel more real than anything else in the real world.

***

The sky is weeping and Harry is sitting at a table in the library with Ron and Tom. Hermione is finding books. Harry pretends he can't tell that Draco, sitting at a table near the windows with Nott and a bright smile on his face, is breaking on the inside. He's been pretending that a lot recently. But he keeps *Seeing* things he doesn't want to see. It's not just the emotions of other people that lodge in his throat these days. He gets whole memories sometimes.

He spent all of breakfast tasting Susan Bones' tart and not realizing he was chewing empty air.

Hermione returns with her hair frizzing out behind her and brown locks curling into brown bookshelves.``There's so little information in this whole library about souls!" she complains. "I could only find some light reading." She throws down ten tomes onto the table with a frustrated huff. "Honestly, you'd think a place like Hogwarts could do better."

Tom pulls the nearest book near him, glances at the title, and discards it immediately. He pulls out another from the pile as Ron grabs a thick novel. Ron says, "Hey, this one looks interesting. *The Collected Stories of the Forgotten Holy Art; a Soul Painter's Anthology*. I'm gonna read this one."

Hermione glances at Ron suspiciously. "You're going to read?"

“Well it’s that or watch you all read and twiddle my thumbs, innit?”

Harry leans over to read from the book Tom selects. Tom slides his arm across the back of Harry’s shoulders and pulls the Gryffindor close.

“This one,” he says softly, voice sliding over Harry’s skin and leaving goosebumps in its wake, “this is the best book. *Soul Plasticity*. It’s contemporary, but progress is so rare in the Wizarding World. I’m interested in seeing what a book from 1993 has to say for itself.”

Hermione leans over on the other side of Tom from where Harry sits. “It’s one of the newest books in the library. It’s by an American author. He’s a muggleborn but in America they don’t care about blood status at all.”

“How odd.” Tom comments. “Blood status feels so integral to the construction of British wizarding society. It is a key tenant of corruption and prejudice.”

Hermione has an expression of forced nonchalance. “Do you think there’s any truth to pureblood rhetoric?”

“Any truth?” Tom questions. “Well, I don’t believe in objective truth. I'm afraid I can’t answer your question. I personally don’t subscribe to the Pureblood belief system and think that it is keeping the wizarding world in a state of perpetual stagnance, but I can’t claim that my viewpoint is ‘true.’”

Hermione relaxes. “How very Hobbes of you.”

“His first name was Thomas. He’s practically my namesake.”

Harry ignores both of them and pours over the text.

Many have hypothesized, including both Marius Shafiq and Elliot Albrecht, that the soul is the most immutable component of that which renders us human. However, there are two glaring case studies that cast a shadow of doubt over this conventional wisdom.

He flips through a few pages and arrives at the first case study.

Carmen Young (1973 -) was eleven years old when studies revealed half of her soul was gone. Young was afflicted with a rare genetic disease affecting less than 1 in 400,000 births annually among wizardkind. She was diagnosed with Animignis, a disease in which the afflicted individual’s magic attacks pieces of the soul and burns them away.

She stabilized when she turned eleven. Animignis is often considered a child’s disease and those who survive past the young juvenile period typically stop experiencing the disease’s soul cannibalization. No cure exists for Animignis at this time.

According to research tools, Young did not stabilize prior to the loss of half of her soul. She has been monitored closely for two decades.

In the most recent measure of her soul, she had a whole soul. She has been measured as having a whole soul for the last fifteen years, in fact. This indicates that within five years of losing half her soul-mass, she regrew that which her disease had cannibalized.

How is this possible? The answer lies in the most obvious of conclusions:

souls are not in fact immutable. They grow, change, and can heal from even the most extensive of damage.

This book likens the soul to the human brain. The human brain is capable of reorganizing itself in the event of brain mass loss and healing from injuries that should cause a decrease in functionality. The brain overcomes damage with neural plasticity and tenacity.

The comparison is imperfect: the brain cannot re-grow without the aid of potions, and the soul grows without the influence of outside factors. The brain exists independently from magic and the current prevailing hypothesis is that the soul and magical core exist in a state of interconnectedness such that separation of the soul and magic is impossible.

Even so, the examples of Carmen Young and Randy Barabus, case study on page 273, indicate that souls are influenced by time and association with other whole souls. When it comes to the least understood component of that which makes us human, one thing is exceedingly clear: nothing is set in stone.

Harry blinks heavily. His heart starts beating in his chest. Something buried deep under layers and layers of graphite, something faint and smudged and deciding what it wants to be, begins to come to life.

What if Harry had never seen hearts? What if he saw souls? His aunt has a soul of ink and Sirius has a soul of clockwork and Tom…

Harry stares at Tom without seeing his exterior and instead presses inside. And...yes. There.

Tom has a heart, no, a *soul,* that resembles a bouquet of gladioli. Some flowers are white, some are purple, and yellow, and some are crimson lined. Most of the flowers are wilted and many are rotting. The image

of decay hangs heavy to their stems. They are dying. And yet, amidst the carnage, a few buds are growing tall, strong, and… *beautiful.* The flowers are not held in a vase of glass but rather in a vase of grey sketch marks, shimmering and hardened pencil shavings that are relentlessly inconsistent. In some places, the vase is drawn with dark and confident lines, in other places, broken lead crumbles into shadows.

Some of the gladioli wrap around the vase and weave in and out of the graphite. It looks almost as if the growing flowers are sprouting out of the pencil lead and transforming the grey color into something vivid and living.

Harry remembers hoping that he would one day find someone just as grey and lonely as him.

But even Tom is filled in with brilliant color.

Tom and Hermione are talking or maybe arguing when Ron gasps loudly.

Hermione rolls her eyes. “What, Ronald? Did you just discover the meaning of the schwa and learn all about the word ‘alone?’”

Tom snickers.

Ron mutters, “Hilarious. You’re a real comedian. No, I’ve been reading about a bunch of soul-painters right? Well, it turns out that three of them committed suicide in exactly the same way.”

“How?” Harry asks. Tom glances back at him in something akin to

concern.

“With a blood quill! They all made self-portraits out of their own blood and died while doing it. All three portraits are currently displayed in France’s Enchanted Artistry Museum. Isn’t that gnarly?”

“It’s certainly something,” Tom agrees evenly.

“I don’t think I’d ever want to paint myself with just one color,” Harry says. “But sometimes I feel like I’m colorless on the inside. Maybe...painting yourself with red proves that you are filled with pigment even if you can’t see it in the places that matter.”

Tom’s face has gone pale and Hermione and Ron are staring at Harry with emotions that press against him insistently.

Fear. His heartbeat quickens. There’s a smell of something almost like ammonium and vanilla together. Adrenaline courses through his veins. “Not Harry.”

When Ron opens his mouth, Harry finds his mouth opening as well. They say, in an odd chorus, “But you’d never do anything like that, would you Harry?”

Ron and Harry blink at one another from across the library table. Harry knows he should say something but he’s also feeling so confused and *did he just know what I was going to say? Can Harry read minds?*

Can he? Harry doesn’t know. He turns to Hermione and ends up saying with her, “Harry, are you alright?”

Hermione is so *full,* there are fears and considerations and hopes and insights all carved into beautiful unyielding marble. But there's a warmth to the marble Harry's forgotten to see. Something like a heated spring runs underneath Hermione's soul, giving her marble walls a current of comfort.

"Harry?" He repeats with her mouth. Has he spoken?

"Harry…" There are hands on his body and lips pressing against his years and a voice saying, "Come back to *me,"* but he hasn't gone anywhere. He's right here. He's seeing *everywhere.*

"That's quite enough, I think," A voice says from above him. He stares up into two large eyes covered by two lenses on a pair of very thick glasses. The woman has on no less than six scarves embroidered with tiny silver bells that catch the dim light of the library just so.

"Come now, Little Soul Traveler. Come back to yourself."

It's still raining. Harry exhales.

"Hullo there, Professor Trelawney," he says.

"Hello, Mr. Potter," she says in a voice that is far stronger than he's ever heard it. She smiles down at him indulgently and maybe even a little bit affectionately. "I think you and I are long overdue for a chat."

Harry's not quite sure how he walks through the library and onto the familiar path that leads to the artroom. He does take notice when

instead of going to his studio he keeps going up the tower and then through a ladder and trapdoor into the gaudiest classroom he's ever seen.

Trelawney motions that he should sit on a fluffy white blanket. He sits. She sits next to him.

"You are a Seer, Harry," she tells him.

He feels like he is eleven years old and staring up at a giant with a birthday cake. *"Yer a wizard, Harry."*

He knew that already. He's a Seer. He's a soul-seer. "You already told me that, once," he says.

"I did. But I should have told you more than just that. My grandmother was a Seer. She was not a soul-seer like you. She could see the future. Isn't that amazing?"

Harry thinks about it. "It sounds lonely."

Trelawney smiles bitterly. "It was. She could see the future so well she was never allowed to do anything else. Oh, she was respected. They called her 'The Great Cassandra Trelawney.' How beautiful she was, sitting in her glass cage."

"Why was she in a cage?" Harry asks.

"Because she could see things they could not. She was valuable. She

told me once when I visited her that the best thing for Seers to do is hide. She sat me on her knee and said, 'let them think you are a fraud, a fake, a fool. Let them think any prophecy is luck. Only then will you be free.'"

Harry frowns. He looks at Trelawney and tries to See beyond the surface. And yes… there. There.

He feels himself recoil in shock.

Her heart, her soul, is a grey and faded thing. It's smudged in every corner and fingerprints stain all the wrong places. It's a soul made of graphite.

She's just like me.

"When you see so many options of who you can be, of who you will be, everything feels like a rough-draft," Trelawney says. "I'm still trying to decide what color I want to be."

"Can you see souls too?" Harry asks.

She shakes her head. "Oh no, child. That gift is far rarer than mine. But I can see the future. Or a few of them, at any rate."

"And you pretend you can't, don't you? Hermione thinks you make everything up."

She nods once, briefly. "I make many things up. I think they call me a

‘hack.’ It’s safer that way. It would take so few legitimate accounts of the future before they’d put me in a glass cage. I’ll tell you right now, Draco will take Ginny to the Yule ball and we will eat banana pudding again tomorrow night. I could tell you a great deal more than that but I won’t. I’ve learned the hard way that being able to see the future is quite different from being able to change it. It just means that I live many tragedies twice.”

Harry ponders that. Trelawney looks so heartbroken for a moment, Harry wants to reach out to her. “I can’t imagine,” he says.

“You don’t have to. You are capable of looking into my soul and finding all your answers. But you must never let the world know that. Let them think that you are merely a talented painter. Let that be the extent of your abilities. Soul-seers very rarely survive when they are forced into positions of being used as tools.”

“Why?” Harry asks, “Because they are mistreated?”

Trelawney turns her back on Harry and stares into the bottom of a teacup that sits on the floor in front of her. Her voice is melancholy. “No, Harry. It’s because they go searching for blood quills.”

***

When Harry kisses Tom that night and goes to bed with him in the Hufflepuff dorm, he stares up at the canopy of flowers.

“Tom, what are we doing together?” He asks at midnight.

“Going to the Yule ball together tomorrow,” Tom says.

Harry sighs and bites his lip. He asks, quietly, “Do you love me?”

Tom rolls over so that he leans over Harry, with one elbow propped up on the pillow next to Harry’s head. “Why are you asking?”

Harry brings up one palm and cradles it against Tom’s cheek. “Just wondering, I guess,” he answers.

Tom bends down and presses his lips to Harry’s. It’s soft and fast. It’s a greeting and an answer. Not every kiss is passionate and happening on a stage in front of an audience (or in a glass cage). This kiss is no less beautiful for its brevity.

Tom pushes some hair out of Harry’s eyes. “Do *you* love me?” He whispers back as a challenge.

Harry cranes up his head and kisses Tom again, neck stiff with exertion until Tom gently pushes the younger boy back down into pillows without breaking their embrace. Harry’s sleepy eyes are closing, Tom’s swiss-roll sweet lips are velvet soft, and every other sound fades into silence. Harry no longer hears the rustle of sheets, the soft snores of the other boys in the room behind their own curtains, the crackle of the fire. It’s all quiet, when Tom’s lips meet Harry’s.

They pull apart and Tom rolls back to his side of the bed and takes Harry’s hand. He runs his thumb gently over the soft point of Harry’s wrist. “No matter what the future holds, I will remember these days with you for the rest of my life. There will never be another person like you. Isn’t that enough?” He asks.

Harry feels tears collect behind his closed eyes. A few leak out from behind his lashes.

He was twelve years old when the person next to him held him tightly in an alcove of enslaving memory. He wanted to be cherished back then *so badly*.

He's fourteen years old now. He won't drink poison like medicine any longer to live in a facsimile of intimacy and affection. He's grateful that Tom isn't feeding him lies. Harry doesn't know what they're doing. Harry doesn't know if what he feels for Tom is love. Tom's answer is not enough. Harry wants to say "no," or "I don't know."

Instead, he curls himself closer to Tom and murmurs, "Let's just stay like this until the morning."

***

The case of Randy Barabus is in some respects even more remarkable than that of Carmen Young. His soul not only became whole after a mere two and a half years since its splitting in a dueling accident, but the soul grew past its original capacity. Most theorize this had to do with the close relationship he shared with the woman who would eventually become his wife, Margaret Barabus née King.

When talking about his experience, Barabus said, "It was like I was sailing aimlessly over cold water where nothing mattered and nothing existed, and she came out of the depths of a black ocean to become my anchor and my lighthouse. She made me remember what it felt like to come home."

Chapter End Notes

Can you tell that I like psychology?

Also, in case you were wondering how long the fic will be, you're

about halfway through! Interludes notwithstanding, 21 chapters remain.

So folks, please leave a kudos if you feel so inclined or drop a comment to prove I'm not writing into the void. I'd rather be writing into a community of void dwellers if I'm being honest XD

Living

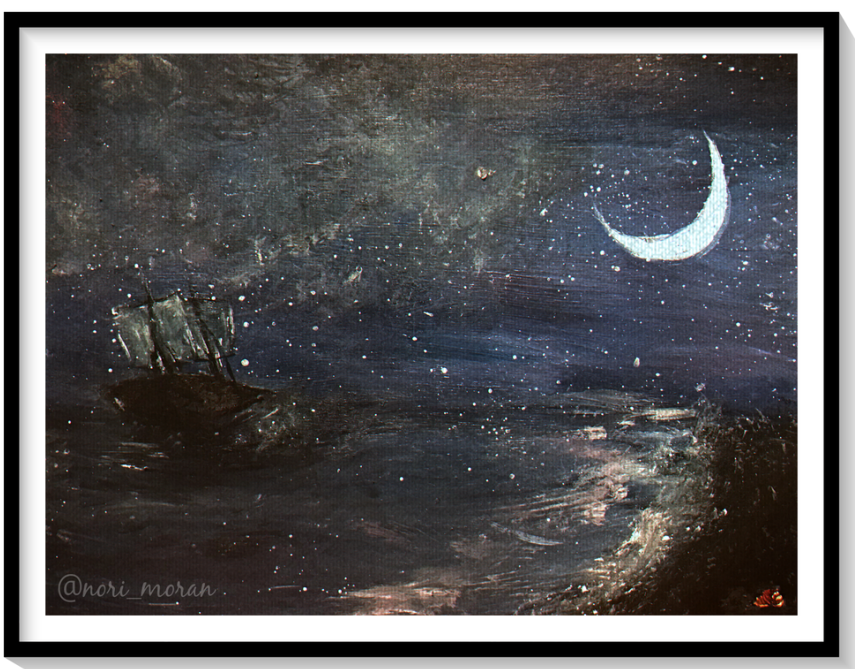
Chapter Notes

> I have returned. Thank you for waiting ladies and gentlemen and everyone in between or off the grid.
>
> PSA: There's one brief moment of minor homophobia in this chapter. Watch out and take care.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This painting was made by twitter account @nori_moran

I may or may not have fangirled myself over this one. It is so beautiful. My God. It is also a real painting in real life of Charon's Ferry.



This gorgeous, gorgeous masterpiece was made by twitter account @churchoflwj. I cannot begin to express how lucky I feel to be able to feature this artwork and I can't get over the brilliant use of light.

And now: back to the story.

Apathy was never an option. Amidst more than a decade of opacity, at least that much is clear.

It rains the whole week after Harry asks Tom if Tom loves him. Two days before the Yule Ball, the ground freezes and frost begins climbing the windows, spreading out in crystalline veins across the foggy glass. The rain transforms into beautiful white snowflakes that fall to the frozen earth in soft clumps and coat the grounds of Hogwarts in a thick blanket.

The day the snow begins, the Gryffindor common room is full of shouting. Fred and George are yelling at Ginny.

Fred is wearing George's sweater and is red in the face. "How could you go to the ball with a Malfoy? A Malfoy!"

George is wearing Fred's sweater and is equally red in the face. "I thought we raised you better than this! You know what that family is like. How could you?"

Ron is sitting on the ground with his head in his hands and breathing heavily. He's also red in the face. He's already yelled at Ginny and Harry thinks he seems to be taking a break.

Ginny is wearing her Hogwarts robes and a satin bow in her hair and is as red in her face as her two older brothers. "You didn't raise me! Mom and Dad did and I'm allowed to make my own choices. Just

because you are prejudiced people doesn't mean I have to be."

"Prejudiced?" George says in a deathly quiet voice. "Dolohov and Malfoy were good friends and spent summers together. Dolohov killed our uncles. He killed your mother's two brothers. Did you forget that, Ginny?"

"Malfoy called Hermione a mudblood in second year. Did you forget that too? He called us all blood traitors. Don't you think he's using you?" Fred adds.

Ginny's lower lip starts to tremble but her eyes harden. "I accused him of that same thing about a week ago and he isn't. He isn't, okay? Look, our grandmother was a Black and her parents were awful people who abused their children. It's not like Grandma Cedrella was hitting dad, was she? Sometimes people are different from their families."

"He's a Slytherin!" Ron pipes up from the floor.

"So was Grandma Cedrella!" Ginny retorts.

"Yeah well, she was there before the house was full of Death Eaters and their children who want to kill us," Fred spits.

"I was considered for Slytherin," Ginny says quietly, "Remember how I told you guys that the hat was asking me to choose between Hufflepuff and Gryffindor? That was a lie. It said that I would fit just as well in either house and I chose to stay with my family. It seemed kind of disappointed too. Would I be a traitor if I was sorted into Slytherin? Would you all just say I was evil if I'd done that? Would I be nothing to you if I were in a different house?"

Fred and George and Ron are all struggling to find words and the few Gryffindors who have been watching the whole thing are staring at Ginny in horror. Harry wishes Hermione weren't hanging out with the mystery person taking her to the ball because he thinks she'd know what to say. Still, Harry understands what it's like to have public opinion flip on you.

He knows what he should say. It doesn't matter if this means he'll be hated again. He's been sitting on a chair far away from the siblings but he stands and crosses over to stand next to Ginny.

He says, "The hat told me I'd do well in Slytherin too. Dumbledore told me that it's our choices that define us, but I think that has very little to do with whatever house we're in."

Ginny's eyes go wide and start to water. "You were considered for Slytherin too?"

"I was," Harry affirms. "And I don't think the hat was half-wrong. I'm just happier here."

A ringing silence follows his confession. A glimmer of sunlight breaks through the clouds and shines across Ginny's face.

Fred coughs slightly. "Erm. I was also told by the hat I could be a good fit. There. I mean."

George nods and adopts an old-sounding voice. "Hmm yes, it's all right here. You have a very crafty and ambitious mind, I see. Oh? Yes, I can't separate you from your brother then. Better be Gryffindor!"

Alicia pipes up from near the fireplace, "I thought I was the only one

who'd been asked if I wanted Slytherin. I said no, but I always wondered."

"I didn't know," Ginny says. "I thought I was alone."

"Never, Gin," Fred and George say.

"If Malfoy hurts you, I'll kill him," Ron promises, "but whatever. I guess I'm the only Weasley who wasn't considered for Slytherin and now I'm kind of mad about it."

Harry thinks that he's maybe just managed to change, at least for a few minutes, the way one rival house feels about the other. It's not a bad feeling.

He wonders if Draco is defending himself several floors below in the dungeons. He wonders what color Draco's soul has become.

Behind the grey clouds, there is a hint of blue. The snow keeps falling.

***

There's a kind of excitement and feverish quality to the days leading up to the Yule ball. It makes the day the ball actually arrives feel somehow anticlimactic to Tom. The Hufflepuffs are all flitting this way and that, fixing the hair of a friend here or smoothing out the wrinkle in a dress robe there, but the frenetic quality of life is no greater or lesser than it was Yesterday.

All in all, Tom feels rather calm. He used his money as the son of House Black (and he truly hopes Orion is turning in his grave at that inclusion to the family legacy) and has already purchased himself a rather handsome ensemble. He is dressed in a silk black dress robe with a classic silhouette, the robe itself brushing his ankle. The sleeves are long but not overly so, and the robe is open so one can see the tight and black shirt he wears underneath. His undershirt is inlaid with thousands of minute crystals.

The dress robe itself is embroidered with golden, silver, and ruby-red thread, each splash of color forming lilies in the midnight of his robe's cloth.

The lilies hold two meanings. The first: they connect him to Harry's mother. And the second: they are a symbol of purity. As the son of the ancient and noble house of Black, let the reporters and vultures make of that symbolism what they will.

Beatrice of course looks stunning in deep purple robes that show off her rather ample cleavage, and Cedric is also wearing black dress robes, although his are not as decorated as Tom's. He looks nervous and his blond hair is a little unkempt.

Tom walks over to him and mutters a quick charm. Cedric's hair rearranges itself to look artfully well-coiffed.

"Thank you," Cedric says. "I don't know why I'm so nervous."

"It couldn't possibly be because you are going to have to dance in front of an entire audience with a girl you've only barely started dating," Beatrice says.

"Tom's going to dance in front of everyone too," Cedric complains,

“And he looks fine!”

“To be fair,” Tom says dryly, “Harry is not a girl I’ve only just started dating.”

“Isn’t he?” Susan Bones mutters from one of the couches where she is weaving lilac into Hannah’s hair. “Aren’t we all just girls who’ve only just started dating?”

“What are you even talking about?” Hannah asks.

“I don’t know. I’ve seen Luna say things like that before and it seemed fun.”

Zacharias Smith is spraying something that smells awful on himself (although it was surely expensive) and states, “Can you believe Longbottom is taking Luney to the ball? She’s just a third-year and barmy as hell. No wonder though, Lonbottom’s got a few screws loose himself.”

“They seem to be good friends,” Tom says. “There’s nothing wrong with a bit of friendship.”

“I heard that Draco Malfoy is taking Ginny Weasley to the ball,” Hannah says in a hushed whisper.

“No,” Beatrice says. “You didn’t.”

“I did,” Hannah affirms.

“It’s probably true too,” Susan says, “Malfoy’s been almost decent to Weasley these last few weeks. I heard it from Lavender Brown.”

“Both the Patil twins say that Draco’s been making eyes at Ginny and she’s been making them back.”

“A Malfoy taking a Weasley to the ball?” Smith guffaws. “That would be like Harry finally getting his head out of his arse and stopping with all that drawing nonsense. Or better yet, if Harry grew a pair and stopped going out with boys. No offense Tom, but it's pretty clear which one of the two of you is the man in the relationship, and we need the wizarding saviour to be a man. Harry getting stronger or a Weasley going out with a Malfoy will happen when hell freezes over.”

Tom sighs and looks out the window at the snow-covered ground. “No one really knows if hell is filled with fire or ice. For all we know, Hell could already be frozen over,” Tom almost pauses but then mutters, “You’ll have to let us know when you get there.”

Smith is immediately on his feet and his face is red and thunderous. “What did you say to me?”

Tom says, “You heard me.”

The hubbub in the common room dies down immediately and the air goes still. Tom can feel power rising to his fingertips.

Smith is firing an expeliarmus the next second which Tom neatly side-steps and then he tosses the same spell back. Smith’s wand arcs through the air and lands in Tom’s waiting palm. Tom twirls it in his fingers. He could snap it. He sighs once more and tosses it back to the

boy.

Smith catches it.

“Don’t talk poorly about Harry or his friends ever again,” Tom warns. “Or I won’t give your wand back next time.”

Tom can see resenment in Smith’s eyes, sure, but he also sees a kind of growing respect. Smith doesn’t say anything.

Tom wasn't expecting he would. He turns to Cedric and Beatrice. “Ready to go out and meet your adoring fans?”

Beatrice surprises him by giving him an impromptu hug. “Yes,” She says into his shoulder, “I think we’re ready now. And remember Tom, today is a day for you to just have fun and be a kid.”

***

When all the champions are lining up, Harry is surprised to see Hermione looking stunning and holding Viktor Krum’s hand.

“Huh,” he says.

“Couldn’t let you be the only one to go out with a seventh year,” she says to Harry. "Or let you be the only one to take a fourth year to the ball," she says to Tom.

Tom laughs and pulls Harry into his side. “Suppose you couldn't,” he says. Harry is dressed in red dress robes with long sleeves embroidered with phoenix feathers. When he lifts his arms, it looks rather like he has wings. He and Tom make a striking pair.

Harry is also wearing a rose boutonniere and a red pocket square. (Petunia does not know much about Yule Balls. She does know that Harry has a date and he is going to a dance from their letters. She bit her lip, thought about what her mother did for her on her first formal dance, and then sent Harry a boutonniere. She also sent an accompanying red pocket square. She may not be his mother and he may not be her son, but she's his aunt. That's the choice she's making. It's a start.)

He and Tom are still outshined by Fleur whose blonde hair cascades down her shoulders in such vivid contrast to her dress robes which are the color of starlight. She is shining. Roger Davies is accompanying her, but no one will notice him for the entire night. (He won't mind very much.)

The dance of the champions goes smoothly. Harry puts one hand on Tom's shoulder, and another in Tom's palm, and they waltz.

"You have improved," Tom notices during the dance. It's not as easy as breathing, but it's a close thing.

"I try," Harry says.

"You succeed," Tom answers.

"Well, they don't call me the golden boy for nothing," Harry says with a wink.

After the dance, Harry goes off to grab a drink of butterbeer. Beatrice nabs Tom and the two of them start to dance. Ron ambles over to Harry. He took one of the Patil twins with him but she abandoned

him.

“Do you reckon Viktor loves Hermione?”

Harry looks at Viktor’s soul, a strong one made of decisive ink. “No. But he admires her. Love takes time, I think. You don’t have to love someone to get to know them, maybe.”

“Yeah, maybe,” Ron says, scuffing his shoes. “She should have asked me to go with her.”

“You should have asked her if you wanted to go to the ball with her,” Harry says.

“Funny story: that doesn’t actually make me feel better.”

“Huh, well you know what they say about how much free advice is worth,” Harry says.

He is met by a look of blank confusion on Ron’s face. “What do they say?”

Harry deadpans, “It’s worth nothing. It’s *free*.” Harry laughs and then adds, “It’s a muggle saying.”

Ron says, “Hey, it’s actually not bad. Maybe I’ll use it sometime. Do you think Hermione would know it?”

Harry groans and says, “I bet she would. But I also categorically refuse to help you start dating her. If I’m gonna be the third wheel in this relationship, I can’t also be your love counselor.”

Ron splutters and turns red, “Who said anything about dating Hermione?”

Harry pats Ron’s shoulder. “You didn’t have to say anything. I can read it all over your face.”

Ron says, “Bet you just read it in my soul.”

“There too,” Harry affirms. “Your soul is really pretty by the way.”

“Yeah? What’s it look like?”

“Your soul is like glass-blown sculpture. It’s kind of whimsical and it’s filled with vibrant colors: scarlet and royal purple and the kind of green you see in ferns and blades of grass, and the kind of blue the sky has right before the sun rises. It’s magic through and through.”

Ron digests all that and then places his own hand on Harry’s shoulder. “So are you. You’re magic, Harry, through and through.”

***

Ginny is incandescently beautiful in robes Draco pretends were extras sent to him by accident by the tailor they have on retainer. She’s wearing pink dress robes with amethyst and emerald butterflies sewn into the fabric.

(She definitely did not believe they were free when he gave them to her. She still doesn't. When he tried to give them to her, she refused.

“No. These are too expensive. I’m not some gold-digger.”

“They cost nothing, Ginny. Got them for free, actually. Bit of a mix-up with our tailor.”

“I don’t believe that for one second.”

“Well, they’re too small for my mother to wear. If you don’t wear them, I’ll have to throw the robes out. Malfoys don't just give things away.”

Then Ginny had reached out and protectively held them to her chest. “You can't do that!”

“Then wear them, Weasley.”

“You're insufferable.”

“I’m Draco, actually. Draco Malfoy.”)

Her red hair is piled high atop her head and her lashes are fuller and darker than usual.

When they walk into the hall hand in hand, everyone gapes at them.

Even Dumbledore. It gives Draco a not-insignificant amount of pride.

They dance like they are made for one another, and at some point, everyone else stops dancing just to watch them. Ginny is a vision, spinning out and around, and then she and Draco pull out what they've been practicing for weeks. A quick spell and the two of them lift off the ground, holding each other and sailing about the great hall with footsteps landing silently on thin air.

Draco feels free and Ginny is beaming from ear to ear. The light sheen of sweat clinging to her cheeks and the back of her neck makes her seem somehow even more beautiful.

When the song ends, they land back on the ground. The hall erupts into thunderous applause from the schools that don't know a Weasley and a Malfoy have no business dancing together. When Draco leaves Ginny for a moment to use the loo, Nott corners him.

"You know word of this will spread."

"Let it," Draco says as he washes his hands.

"Your *father* will hear about this."

Draco stares Nott straight in the eyes. "Let him."

"Don't you care? What are you doing Draco?"

Draco checks his reflection to make sure he still looks flawless. He does. "Living, Theo. You should try it sometime."

And then he returns to the hall and keeps dancing with Ginny.

***

Tom is watching Harry giggling and dancing with George Weasley. George is a very poor dancer but what he lacks in talent he makes up for with *style*.

Lucette, the busty blonde from Beauxbaton's, is standing next to Tom by the snack table. She says, "You and 'Arry make an 'andsome couple."

"Thank you," Tom says.

"So do zey," she says motioning to Ginny and Draco.

Ginny and Draco are no longer sailing about in the air, but their dancing is still eye-catching. It's also somewhat racy. It turns out the Weird Sisters were booked for the ball and they alternate between popular songs and slow dance songs. They are also all men, despite their name. And wearing black robes that are torn.

Tom nods. "Surprising, isn't it?"

"She's a pureblood, no? I do not understand why zis would be so surprising."

The hall falls into something closer to silence when a ghost enters the room. The grey lady is beautiful even in death. Helena Ravenclaw passes through the students without care. Her eyes are only for Tom. They are filled with hate.

She stops in front of him and says, demands, “You will dance with me.”

“Of course, my lady,” Tom says.

“I’m not your anything,” she responds.

Still, Tom begins dancing with the ghost to the best of his abilities. Students start waltzing again and the Weird Sisters resume their playing of music. It’s loud enough no one can hear the words exchanged between Tom and the Grey Lady.

“I know what you are,” She tells him.

“A student?”

“An abomination. I tried to get the little Gryffindor muggleborn to learn as well, but she turned out to be useless. I gifted her with information and she has done nothing.”

“She’s not little,” Tom says, “To me at least. Her existence is not small.” Hermione is brilliant and brave and she feels like a friend now. Beatrice, Hermione, and Cedric might be his only friends. It’s strange though. He didn’t have any friends in his previous life. Harry is something... more.

“I know not what you did in the last five weeks to disguise it, but the smell of death magic on you before was strong enough it was fouling up the entire school. You might now smell like a living child, but I know better. And even when you were not the cursed remnants of the most foul magic, you were still a deceiver, weren’t you?”

“In the last five weeks, you say?” Tom asks. He recalls the book on soul plasticity. “I no longer smell tainted?”

“Your deception will not work on me. I know better.”

Tom knew his soul could grow but… it sounds almost like his soul is doing more than growing. It sounds like it’s healing. It sounds like he might no longer be a Horcrux… but that’s impossible.

Tom says, “I am not the person you once met. I promise.”

“All the ghosts agree you are dangerous. We keep the children away from you. But we are watching. And I will demand payment for that which you’ve stolen from me.”

“What did I steal?” Tom asks.

“You know what you took.”

The diadem, Tom recalls with a grimace. But he knows exactly where it is. And the Horcrux once held inside its confines is now on Harry’s wrist in the bracelet.

“What if I returned it? Would you believe me then that I’m not whoever you think I am? Because I am not an abomination.”

“You were always good with words.”

“I can bring you the diadem. I swear it.”

The grey lady sniffs. “I will not believe you. Still, I give you until the new year to bring it to me. If you fail, I will leave the headmaster the same hints I left your not small muggleborn.”

Tom sinks into a graceful bow. “Thank you, my lady.”

“I’m not your anything,” She says again. She passes through Tom and exits the hall.

Suddenly Beatrice is next to him. “Was that the Grey lady?”

“It was,” Tom says.

“What did she want?”

“She lost something,” Tom says. “She wants me to help her find it.”

“Can you?”

Tom feels vibrantly alive all of the sudden. In the last five weeks, he

lost the taint of death magic on his soul. He's breathing and he's present and Harry is looking at him from across the room with a blush on his cheeks and bright greener than jade eyes.

"I can."

***

Tom steals Harry away from his dancing with Professor Trelawney (which was very fun even though she is incredibly drunk) and Harry doesn't ask about Tom's dance with the ghost. Tom will tell him when he's ready.

As they fall into the step sequence, Harry can't help smiling.

"What?" Tom asks. His eyes catch the candlelight and sparkle brighter than the crystals on his shirt.

"Nothing," Harry says. "I'm just happy." It feels warm in the hall. Kids are all dancing around him. There's magic in the air and mistletoe woven into the stone of the walls of his home. It smells like clove, orange, and butterbeer.

Tom grins then, boyish and pleased. "I guess I'm happy too."

They keep dancing and dancing. Later, when the song is slower, Harry lays his head on Tom's shoulder and they sway to the harmony made by a cello and a lute.

“This is so much better than when I used to only be able to see you when I was dreaming,” Harry says.

“It is,” Tom agrees.

Harry leans up to look into Tom’s eyes. “If I could go back and do everything again, I would.”

Tom’s eyes crinkle. He leans down and kisses Harry. Everything goes kind of sweet and hazy. It feels like that moment it smells like rain but the sky is still. The strings on the cello are plucked one, two, three, four, five times. Tom pulls away but Harry reaches a hand behind Tom’s neck and pulls him back.

They kiss again. It’s the kind of kiss that opens up the sky and brings down the rain. It’s the kind of rain that’s warm and bold and will leave Harry dripping as he dances in the downpour. If that first kiss was the moment right after a lightning strike, this kiss is the thunder.

When they part, Tom strokes his hand on Harry’s cheek before Harry goes back to leaning his head on Tom’s shoulder. Tom presses a kiss to Harry’s hair.

“If I could go back and do everything again, even getting trapped in that diary, I would. Just to be here with you right now, I would.”

Harry closes his eyes. It’s warm in the hall and kids are dancing all around them. They’re standing underneath mistletoe. There’s snow on the ground outside and Harry is in the arms of someone, against all reasons, he trusts.

He wonders if this is what it feels like to start falling in love.

Chapter End Notes

Please leave a kudos or comment if you feel so inclined so I know I am not writing into the void.

Creation

Chapter Notes

I have returned from the great beyond. To all of you lovely people who are still reading this, thank you for your ongoing support!

If you want to submit any fanart, email it to maytal.w.booth@gmail.com

Also, I published a real book. You can check it out and support the author if you want to for just $4.99 here: Book Link

Be happy and healthy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This gorgeous image of the Hungarian Horntail was made by the Tumblr 'Aight. I love everything about it.

It all goes back to two bright green eyes and a child sniffling in the back of the closet. Something woke up then: a remnant of emotion long forgotten.

It is beautiful in the wizarding side of Geneva. When Harry stepped out of the floo and saw the city, he thought “yes, this is what a fairytale is supposed to look like.”

The roads are made of smooth stones that resemble gold-streaked marble. They are lined with vibrant wildflowers. Roses climb up the sides of handsome cottages with thatched roofs. Ivy and vines with red berries are found on the occasional villa. There’s a light dusting of snow that’s soft as powdered sugar.

The whole city is clean and fresh and it smells like pine leaves and mulled wine. Harry is glad that the city is so marvelously beautiful because he is so marvelously stressed about his upcoming mastery exam.

Tom and Sirius have not been helping. In the beautiful snowfall, they have been drilling Harry on how to apparate. In snowbanks in a forest, they make Harry try again and again to apparate. Sirius has been teaching Harry the theory behind apparitions since last year but now it's time to try applying theory to practice. Harry attempts to start a snowball fight with Sirius but the man is unimpressed. Lips pressed into a thin line, he says, “I want you to try apparating again, Harry.”

Harry, tired and stressed, yells, “You sound just like Tom!”

Tom, eyes glittering dangerously, retorts, “So he sounds like someone who cares about your life then?”

Sirius says, “You’re in a tournament that might take your life. I’m trying to give you every tool I can, otherwise, how could I call myself your guardian?”

Privately, Harry thinks that Sirius should redirect this energy into

attaining a higher level of sobriety. Outwardly he says, “Maybe not by teaching your underage godson illegal magic?”

“Everything’s legal when you’re fighting for your life,” Sirius says. “You asked me to teach you this. Again, Harry.”

When Harry grumbles and thinks about materializing five feet away in a circle drawn in the snow, he hears Tom murmur, “That’s it. Good boy.”

Harry’s face lights on fire. He mutters the charm and with a pulling sensation in his navel finds himself not in the snow circle, but right next to Tom. Even still, Harry finds himself grinning. He did it! He apparated.

Tom’s face lights up. He immediately starts checking Harry over. He makes sure Harry has all of his fingers and appendages and when he seems satisfied, he picks Harry up and spins him around.

“You are a marvel,” he breathes. “You astound me.”

“It was nothing much,” Harry says.

“I disagree.” Tom doesn’t set Harry down on the ground. Instead, he hooks his hands underneath Harry’s thighs so that Harry feels like he needs to cross his ankles behind Tom’s back and put his arms around the older boy’s neck.

“You can put me down,” Harry says. He’s taller than Tom like this. He can see into Tom’s dark blue eyes and count the seven snowflakes melting on his lashes.

“Do you want me to?” Tom asks. His pupils are blown wide and his lips are slightly parted.

“No,” Harry whispers.

“Then what do you want?” Tom asks. Harry eyes Tom’s lips again. They look full and inviting.

Instead of giving an answer, he leans down the short few inches that separate them and kisses Tom. He almost misses, his lips go slightly too far to the right and his nose almost smashes into Tom’s, but blushing furiously he turns his head to correct his mistake. His eyes are closed but he can feel Tom’s lip curling up in an amused smile as Harry works to slot his lips into the right position. When their lips meet, they brush feather-soft, and then Harry can’t help but giggle little, soft puffs of air ruffling Tom’s hair ever so slightly.

Then Tom surges up and they kiss more firmly. There’s a brief clash of teeth and then Harry’s mouth is opening and he feels Tom’s tongue on his. It’s a quick touch, like an exploration, but it's electric and every nerve in Harry’s body feels like it's on fire. Harry presses his own tongue back and revels in the feeling of heat spreading through his body. If the world ended right now, Harry doesn’t think he’d mind much.

He pulls back to stare at Tom with bright eyes. Tom sets Harry down on the snow gently and presses a gentle kiss to Harry’s forehead.

“You are so adorable, you know that?”

Harry’s still blushing but he puts his hands on his hips and says,

“Naturally. I’m hot too, though.”

“Oh yes,” Tom agrees, “Very hot. Now, I want you to apparate again. Maybe to Sirius this time.”

Harry had forgotten about Sirius. Sirius is standing several feet away with his back turned very deliberately.

“You done over there?” Sirius calls out. “I feel really fucking weird about being both of your guardians but I know better than to come between young love. Fuck, I'll have to give you both the talk.”

“We’re done,” Harry calls.

Sirius turns around and his eyes are hard. “Good. Well done, Harry. But party time is over. Again.”

***

In the end, Harry has to apparate six times without problems before Tom and Sirius let him rest. The next day, they all lie on a large couch in the Black family Geneva Villa. Unlike Grimmauld when Harry and Tom first saw it, the villa is understated and clean. Kreacher brings Harry several different snack platters: finger sandwiches and custard pies and fresh fruit, and he glares balefully at Tom and Sirius.

He mutters, “pushing young Master Potter before his exam, oh how’d Master Regulus would cry over such mistreatment,” which gets Sirius to pull Kreacher bodily from the room. Kreacher comes back later and says, “Young Master Potter needs all the strength before his big day tomorrow. Kreacher has brewed calming tea, so very calming, to settle the nerves,” and later, “Kreacher has prepared energizing juice, oh so

energizing, for Young Master Potter," and then in the evening, "Kreacher has found refreshing water for Young Master Potter, revitalizing water, this is."

Needless to say, Harry is very well hydrated going into the morning of his exam.

After Harry goes around the city for a day with Tom and Sirius, the three of them make their way to the building for the International Confederation of Wizards: Artistry Division Review Board. The building itself resembles a castle with expansive red spires and gorgeous stone bricks. It is built to overlook lake Geneva.

Entering the building is shockingly easy compared to all the pomp and circumstance of the British Ministry. Harry, Tom, and Sirius walk through the front door of the building and into a little circular room with a skylight dome. A woman in stunning grey robes sits behind a large oakwood desk and smiles brightly at them.

"Welcome, welcome," she says in slightly accented English. "I imagine Mr. Potter is here for his examination."

"Yes, I am," Harry says.

"Wonderful. Yes. You are in the records. Here, come closer to collect your pass. Yes, it's the bright green one. Hard to miss."

Harry indeed walks forward and is handed a green pass. The woman gives him a gentle pat on the hand and says, "Go through the door to your left. You will see your companions again when the exam concludes. Good luck!"

Harry turns and a blue door materializes to the left of him. It is not against the wall. Rather, it stands proudly in the middle of the room. Harry shrugs and opens the door. He steps through the doorway and instead of going nowhere, his foot lands in a much larger hall. The door disappears as soon as both of Harry's feet are in the new space.

The hall has several windows and many views of the lake. On a kind of dais, six grey-robed wizards and witches sit.

One old witch with dark skin and a gorgeous red headscarf stands. "Mr. Potter. Welcome to your exam for attaining a mastery in Enchanted Artistry. We are pleased you had time to join us."

"Oh, um, thank you. I'm honored to be here," Harry says, scratching the back of his neck.

"If you are half the artist we believe you to be, we are the ones honored to have you," the witch states. "Now, your exam will have three parts. I shall introduce the first. Masters of Enchanted Artistry *must* be able to produce the most realistic portraits of any artist in the wizarding world. Portraits are the most proliferated artistic product in the world, and we demand that every master be able to craft life-like and soul-rooted portraits. As such, we will give you no more than eight days to make your own portrait. You may choose to speak with any of us on this panel, or any of your companions with supervision if you would like to use one of us or them as your model. As official portraits of human beings may only be made by true masters of the arts, should you fail to achieve a mastery this year, we will burn the portrait. You are not allowed to leave the exam space until the exam has concluded. You can make any request of us for materials or people to contact and we will determine whether or not the action or material you request is admissible. Do you have any questions?"

Harry had known to expect something like this from veiled hints from Professor Badgerwood, but he thinks for a long time of whose portrait he wants to paint. *Sirius* ? No. *Too soon* , something in Harry whispers.

Tom? No. *Too late,* a louder part whispers. Then who?

Harry's lips turn up as he comes to the perfect answer. "Can I use a muggle phone?" He asks, voice clear and confident. The witches and wizards converse amongst themselves.

"Who will you call?" A tall wizard asks.

"My family," Harry answers.

They speak to each other again. "This is allowed," a blonde woman states.

Another woman says, "What's a *phone* ?"

A wizard whispers, "This is why it's so good we have first-generation enchanters on the board this year."

The same woman says, plaintively, "Yes, but would you please tell me what a *phone* is *?"*

"Shh," someone responds. "You'll see."

Two minutes later a house-elf pops up with a phone and bows, handing the bulky cordless phone to Harry. He dials the home phone number of Privet Drive feeling like he is half underwater. It rings, once, twice, three, four times before Petunia's voice filters through the phone tinny and thin, "Hello? This is Petunia Evans speaking. How may I help you?"

“Hi, Aunt Petunia. It’s me. Harry. Erm. How are you?”

There is silence for a moment and all the review board members lean forward, “ *Harry?* Is that really you?” Her voice is surprised and almost desperate.

“Yeah, it’s me.”

“Oh, *Harry,”* She says, and he imagines her fingers wound around the cord of her phone. “I’m so glad you called. What can I do for you? How’s school going? I know you said in your letters they’re feeding you but I’ve started sending Dudley chocolate just about once per month and I’ve been meaning to ask if you like chocolate. Lily always preferred treacle but I don't think I've ever asked you. You’re doing well, aren’t you? In Hogw-- in your school? No snakerins giving you trouble?”

Harry is surprised at a laugh that’s startled out of him. He feels warm. He wonders if this is what it feels like to be a muggle with a loving parent. “I’m doing well, Aunt Petunia. I’m eating plenty of food and no Slytherins are bothering me. They’re all being quite decent.”

“That’s good,” she says and she sounds so utterly relieved. “I remember some people were downright awful to Lily because, I suppose, it’s not like her whole family was like her, were we?”

He knows Petunia means to say that Lily wasn’t a pureblood. Harry knows what Lily must have heard. *Mudblood.* He can almost imagine her indignance and feeling unwanted by the world she loved. It hurts to think of his mother as a real person. She was someone before she had Harry and she didn’t even have Harry very long. Petunia knew the person Lily was before she was “mum.”

Harry says, “Hearing you now, I’d say you were the same kind of people in all the ways that matter.”

“Right, you were always the forgiving sort,” Petunia’s voice comes across thick. She’s about to say something else when Harry hears a thundering thump-thump-thump of Dudley coming down the stairs. He bellows, “is that HARRY on the phone?”

Petunia must turn her head because her voice comes out quieter, “It is, yes. Want to say ‘hi?’”

“Yes, please.”

In a rustle, Dudley’s voice comes through. “HARRY! Merry almost Christmas! School’s out for a bit and everything’s brilliant.”

“It is, isn’t it?” Harry agrees, beaming. He’s missed Dudley.

“It’d be better if you came home for the holidays,” Dudley says.

Home. Harry can’t believe that Dudley thinks Harry would improve his holidays. He’s so used to being the thing to be put of the way during Christmas so the Dursleys can enjoy themselves without him. Harry’s getting the oddest sense that in the last year he’s become part of the family. The Evans family, at any rate.

“I think I’ll come visit a bit for summer hols?” Harry tries.

“That would be epic,” Dudley promises. “You should.”

Harry and Dudley continue to talk for the better part of three hours. Harry learns all about Dudley’s life, his goals, and sees an image beginning to take form in his mind. Dudley’s got an ink-soul. Strong. Bold. The ink is dark but not black. It’s a deep and shimmering navy and it’s still wet. It hasn’t dried all the way yet. It’s settling, it’s daring, and the soul is characterized by so much hope it shines through the darkness of the ink.

When Harry gets off the phone, he requests an easel, a canvas, and basic paints.

He paints a bedroom in Grimmauld’s place that doesn’t really exist. He fills it with deep purple bed sheets (dark purple’s always been Dudley’s favorite color but Vernon once told Dudley that purple is for poofs so he says it’s blue now) and windows and muggle radios and toys and the flying carpet Dudley loved from Harry’s 13th birthday. That feels like a lifetime ago.

Then he starts on Dudley. He paints blonde hair. He paints the creamy face and the cheeks that blush easily. He is given water by someone which he accepts. He works on the strong muscles that are emerging through childhood pudge. This is a boy who is growing, lengthening, getting stronger every day. This is a boy who is growing up.

He fashions hands with calluses from boxing. The legs are strong and toned beneath the pants Harry paints. He ends with Dudley’s eyes, two watery pale blue eyes that look just like Petunia’s. As soon as the eyes are finished, Dudley begins to blink. If Harry’s put enough soul into this piece, it will root and Dudley will be a perfect portrait. He waits and waits, as Dudley turns this way and that.

“This is fantastic!” Portrait-Dudley announces. “Where am I?”

“You’re in the townhouse I live in these days,” Harry says.

“There’s magic here!” Dudley says, delighted. “I’ve always wanted to see magic. Ever since I was eleven, I’ve wanted to see *everything.* ”

“Now you can,” Harry says. This feels right. Dudley is laughing as he plays with the magic carpet. He disappears from the frame and pops back. “You can look for as long as you like.”

(Needless to say, Harry passes that part of the exam with flying colors. An interview conducted by talking to Dudley on the phone and asking the same questions to the portrait confirms that the likeness between model and painting is perfect. The responses are identical. Not only did Harry make a quality portrait, but he made one that is already able to move from frame to frame within the Geneva office and throughout Grimmauld place. “Magic doesn’t even exist like that yet. There are charms you have to do to allow free range of motion. And for temporal displacement, there would need to be TWO frames in either location. This magic cannot exist. It can’t!” one wizard complains. “Clearly it does,” another dryly responds.)

The portrait is sent gift-wrapped to Petunia Evans at number four Privet Drive. There’s a small note attached.

Aunt Petunia, this is for you to help whenever you’re missing Dudley and for Dudley whenever he’s home. Something strange pops up in Harry’s mind when he’s writing the note and he adds, *You’re family. My family will always have a place in the magical world.*

***

For the second part of his test, Harry is required to produce an original piece of artwork.

“Your piece must incorporate your original invention. I recall that your professor crafted a never-before-seen color that resembles red in all properties without being red. It was quite impressive. We are excited to see what you will produce.”

Harry knows that the kind of paintings he does naturally are a kind of “soul bound portrait of a fantasy,” or something like that from the Goblins. He also knows that this kind of magic is pretty much unique to him.

He hopes that just painting something the way he always does will be enough to count as something new for the test. He just wanted a score on his N.E.W.T anyway, it’s not like he really needs to get a mastery.

He requests the colors he needs and a large canvas and sets to work. He’s been thinking a lot recently about Greek legends because of how Tom sometimes references different characters from the mythology.

He begins by painting the entire canvas black with broad, splattering strokes. Someone from the review board leans forward.

A clear smile breaks out on Harry’s face as he loses himself to the painting. Portraits are about reproducing something real. They are limited.

When he paints like this, he’s creating something from nothing. And that moment when the paint hits the canvas makes Harry feel like he’s weightless.

Harry dips into browns and deep reds and gold, painting high-backed thrones and a dais and golden filigree. He paints with white the edge

of a glittering chandelier and goes back with contrasting silvers and golds to make the candelabrum shine unnaturally in the dark throne room. He paints melting candles on the chandelier, shiny beads of wax falling slowly down. Shadows of the throne stretch and elongate grotesquely, curling edges reaching out like claws toward a magnificent mahogany table Harry places in the center of the painting.

And on that table, he crafts a crimson pomegranate splitting open like a flower in bloom. Red juice seeps out from every place the pomegranate is cut and drips down onto the ground. The drips *plink* and the wax makes gentle thuds and the two colors, red and white, combine over the darkness of a shining obsidian floor.

The juice drips down and is vibrant as blood. And right by the splitting pomegranate, situated on a golden leaf, seven ruby red seeds glitter invitingly and maliciously in the candlelight.

Harry thinks about Persephone as he paints. She was still young, wasn't she? How would it have felt to have been taken down beneath the ground and hear the whispers of the dead as she was left in a room just like this?

These seeds on the table are red fetters nestled amidst gilded filigree. As soon as she took one bite of the seeds she could never free. Maybe she didn't care, maybe she was angry -- at her mother, at this world, at the man who took her. Maybe she was hungry. A girl needs to eat. Seven seeds were all it took for her to become, willingly or unwillingly, a queen.

Harry finishes the last touches on the seeds, the golden leaf, and stands back. The painting is vibrant, dark, and foreboding. It's perfect.

“I’m done,” he announces and looks at the review board. They are all staring at the painting in various expressions of shock.

One man clears his throat, “You may now have a brief recess while we examine your painting. When your recess ends, we will conclude your exam with an interview.”

After stepping through another doorway that looked like it would go nowhere, Harry ends up in a small room with wooden floors and a window overlooking the lake. There’s a bed with folded grey linens and a bedside table with a kettle and a cup for tea.

Harry pours himself what smells like English Breakfast and takes a sip. He feels like he is clinging to consciousness by a thread and he just wants to rest. Without really thinking about it consciously, he sets the cup down, kicks off his shoes, and slides into the bed. It’s shockingly comfortable. He’s just going to rest his eyes for a moment… yes just a moment.

***

When Harry wakes, the sky has darkened outside his window. He’s tired in a way that goes beyond his body. He feels heavy and sitting up is a struggle. He does it still.

On the bedside table, there is a note written with curling elegant script. *We are ready to begin your interview. Please exit through the blue door to your right at your next convenience.*

Harry casts a quick refreshing charm on himself and slips his shoes back on before he walks through the door and into the room he’d been in before.

The painting has been displayed on one wall. The review board members are all chatting amongst themselves. Harry picks out small words like, “prodigy,” “unprecedented,” and, “never seen a phone before myself, but they’re rather handy, aren’t they?”

When the review members see Harry they settle and calm their expressions.

“You are now in the interview section of your mastery exam. Typically we would try to make sure that you had indeed invented a new technique and not… shall we say, borrowed from another person. In this case, we will ask clarifying questions because it is quite clear that you have gone beyond adding to the field of Enchanted Artistry and have instead invented an entirely new field or at least subfield of magic altogether.”

“I don’t know if that’s true,” Harry says.

“It is,” one person on the board says firmly. The person looks like they are neither a man nor a woman, but rather quite comfortably precisely in between. “This is not simply uncommon magic, Mast-Mister Potter. What you have shown in your painting is not just an incredible amount of talent and mastery of the subject. This is new magic. They will write textbooks about you one day.”

“They already have,” Harry grumbles.

The person who was speaking raises one eyebrow. “Believe me when I tell you that in two decades or so, no one will care about your scar when they are looking at what you’ve brought to life. People survive curses all the time. Very few people create new branches of magic.”

The woman who introduced the first test to Harry clears her throat. “If you are amenable, Mister Potter, we would like to commence the interview.”

“Right, yes, that’s fine.”

“Let’s begin with your process. When painting, are you inspired as you paint or do you have a clear image in mind before your paintbrush ever hits the canvas?”

“A mix of both, I think? Like I know what I want in broad terms but the finer details come as I paint. It’s like every piece of the painting is a seed. I plant them where I want them but I never know exactly how the flowers will look when they bloom.”

“And will the flowers, as you call them, wilt and die over time? For how long are your paintings alive?”

“It’s like a typical portrait. What I have is just one moment. They’ll live for as long as the painting survives.”

“Did you not make a volcano? Will that continue to erupt infinitely?”

“Well, that one was different. I didn’t paint a volcano. I painted a cycle of rebirth.”

“Ah… we see. So your intention matters when painting?”

“I guess so.”

A man in grey robes and with white hair stands and crosses to Harry. He directs Harry's focus to the painting on the wall.

"What did you paint, Harry?"

Harry motions to the canvas. "It's just the underworld from Greek myth. It's the throne room and a table with Persephone's pomegranate. If you listen carefully, you can hear the dripping of the wax and the juice, and the whispers of the dead."

"Yes," the man says, "That's the part I'm most interested in. You see, when you were in your recess, we all found that we could hear the whispers of the dead as you call them when we stood close to the painting. Some of us recognized a few of the voices. They belonged to dead family members or recently departed friends. This begs the question, can you hear the voices of the dead?"

"What do you mean?" Harry asks, staring up at the man. Harry's face is draining of color, he can tell.

"I mean, Harry, that you seem to have painted an actual gateway to the world beyond. Can you hear the dead? Even when you aren't painting, that is?"

"I don't hear them even while painting," Harry says, thinking about it. "I just wanted the voices to be there, I guess. Like I painted the ocean once but it only started soaking me in water when it was finished."

The man thoughtfully tilts his head. "I see. So when you are finished painting, what you make comes to life not only in the painting but at least a little bit, in the real world too."

A person on the dais shouts, “That’s impossible!”

The man turns to face his colleague. “Is it?” he says, spreading his arms expansively. “Is it?”

“We’re not here to discuss that,” a woman declares, firmly. “I think we have more than enough information to make a decision.”

***

Harry exits the building for the International Confederation of Wizards: Artistry Division Review Board five days after the start of his exam.

Tom and Sirius are waiting for him.

Harry holds up a slip of paper with a crooked smile. “It’s official. You’re looking at the youngest master in history.”

Sirius grins. “That’ll knock Snivellus down a few pegs. Damn, just fourteen and look at you.”

Tom tucks Harry under one arm. “You look like you’ve lost at least six pounds since I last saw you. Did you not eat during the exam?”

“I don’t remember, actually,” Harry admits.

“You’re ridiculous,” Tom states.

“He’s also the youngest master in history,” Sirius says.

“I am that,” Harry says. He can’t quite get the conversation he’d had about making something real come to life out of his head.

Harry stares down at his palms feeling unsettled. He remembers thinking that he wanted to feel a pen in his hand like a wand in his palm. He wanted to be capable of creation, like a god.

The back of his tongue feels sandpaper dry. *It’s impossible to make paintings come alive in the real world.*

Tom’s face from back when he was in the diary flashes before him.

A cold and high voice in his mind asks, laughing, *Is it?*

Chapter End Notes

HARRY'S THE YOUNGEST MASTER OF ALL TIME! LOOK AT HIM GO.

Snape could never.

Please leave a kudos if you feel so inclined, or a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void. I'm worrying about that quite a bit TvT

Master

Chapter Summary

Harry is a master, Tom is famous, and there's the second task

Chapter Notes

OMG OMG OMG I LOVE YOU GUYS WITH ALL MY HEART. So, last chapter I was worried about the comment number bc I thought people were dropping this, and my god ladies and gentlemen and everyone in between or off the spectrum entirely, y'all CAME. THROUGH. I shall begin responding to you tomorrow.

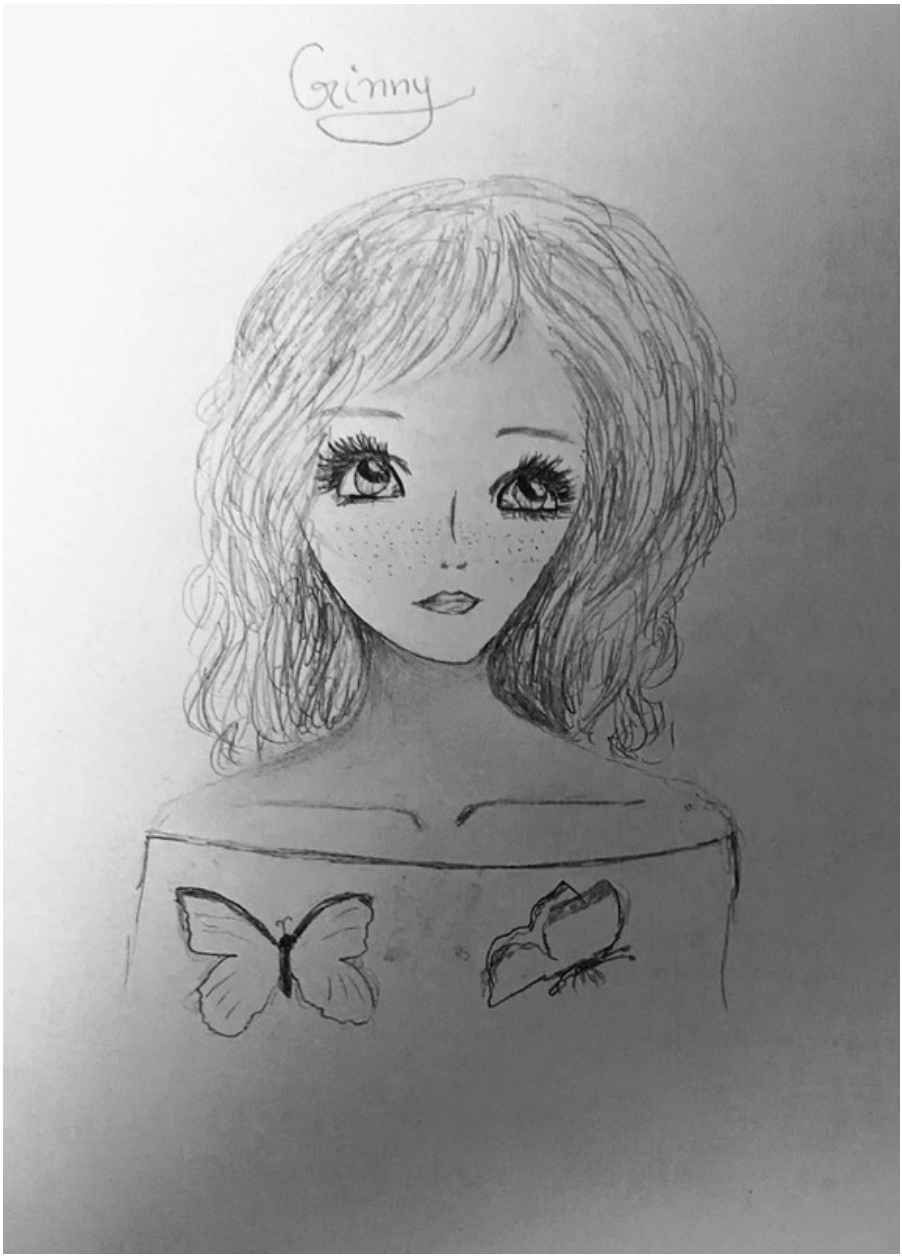
I wrote all of this on planes back and forth from home bc your girl has so much work for university it was the only time I had. Wish me luck on my finals and good luck to everyone in school with your finals and everyone who has actual work with finishing out the year.

I hope that all of the people who celebrate Thanksgiving had a wonderful holiday and I hope that everyone is having a great close to 2021.

If you want to submit any fanart, email it to maytal.w.booth@gmail.com

Be happy and healthy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes



This drawing's artist captured the dress Ginny wore to the Yule ball. They asked to remain anonymous.

Perhaps it was indignance.

Tom Black Discovers Lost Diadem of Rowena Ravenclaw

Rita Skeeter

Yes, folks, you read that **correctly.** It's been missing for longer than all of us readers have been alive. The diadem is the only known relic to have ever belonged to famous and beloved Rowena Ravenclaw. Etched into its surface is the awe-inspiring phrase, "wit beyond measure is man's greatest treasure." I suppose in this era, we must add that it is women's greatest treasure as well.

The diadem is said to enhance the wisdom of the wearer and has been coveted and sought after for centuries. But Tom Black was not deterred by the tale of its unplottable nature from finding this relic. He left it for the Grey Lady (actually the ghost of Helena Ravenclaw, six-page special beginning on page A3 about that discovery) on Christmas with nothing more than a note. The Grey Lady could not be reached for comment.

***

Nothing in his life has ever been consistent. Life changes in an instant. In a single second, the tenuous grasp he has on stability disappears. One bomb crashes too close and suddenly the inevitably of death becomes unbearable. Stepping back into Hogwarts with the youngest master of all time at his side and being the man who "discovered" a missing piece of history proves to Tom that something has changed irrevocably in his life.

He is no longer the talented Hufflepuff dating Harry Potter. He is something *more.* He'd been skating on the top of an icy pond and he's fallen through. He can't hide anymore. He's being watched, for better

and for worse.

It's in the way people look at him now. He's the same as he's always been. He's got his glasses on his nose and his hair is perfectly styled. He's got the same dark eyes and long legs. But there's an edge to the glances he's getting now. It's not just that he's clever or that he's attractive, there's now a sense of awe when people stare at him. Tom's used to that look — he got it plenty back when he was living in his first life before the diary — but those looks of awe were always accompanied by a dose of fear. These looks though, they are hungry and curious but not afraid.

"People keep staring at me," Tom complains plaintively to Harry when he catches his darling in the hallway and pulls him into a hug.

"Cry me a river," Harry says flatly. "I've never been stared at once in my life so I don't think I can relate."

"Harry~" Tom whines, "I'm looking for some sympathy."

"Look, if you were actually upset by the whole thing I'd be sympathetic *and* empathetic, but let's not insult either of our minds by pretending you're not pleased by the attention you're getting," Harry says with an amused quirk of his lips.

Tom sighs and presses a kiss to the top of Harry's head. "You know me so well," he says softly. It's true. Tom revels in the attention he's gotten for discovering a sacred and thought-lost artifact. People are looking at him like he is a marvel, and he is. He is so clearly *more* than everyone else and they realize it now.

Well, he's *more* than almost everyone else. This slender artist in his arms has come back with a mastery and is more famous than ever.

People are awed when they look at Tom, but they are downright worshipful when they look at Harry.

How fortunate then , Tom thinks as he tightens his hold on his artist, *that Harry is* ***mine*** *. They can look at him and love him, but I am the only one who will ever have him.*

Harry pulls out of Tom's grasp and presses onto his tiptoes to give Tom a simple chaste kiss.

"Look, I'm late to class and even if I've a mastery now, I reckon Snape won't take kindly to my tardiness."

Tom waves a hand. "Go on then. But come sit with the Hufflepuffs for dinner tonight."

Harry gives him a mock salute. "You got it, babe," he says with a wink, before turning and continuing down the hall to get to Snape's classroom.

Tom blinks at the term of endearment and feels a belated bit of blood rush to his cheeks after Harry has long sauntered away.

Beatrice appears at Tom's side as though she came from the shadows. "Would you look at that kid? He's gotten so confident, damn. And you've got it bad for him."

"So I do," Tom affirms.

“It’s lucky I view Harry as a little brother or I might steal him from you,” Beatrice says.

Tom turns to face her and narrows his eyes. “You could try, but you would *fail* .”

Beatrice raises her hands in mock surrender. “Ooh, how frightening.”

Tom thinks back to his past and the blood on his hands. He thinks of forcing little boys and grown men to kneel at his feet. He feels the phantom crackle of the power he gets when he casts a Crucio or Imperio. He thinks of the lengths he would go to protect Harry, to keep him. Tom’s smile is a bitter, twisted thing. “You don’t know the half of it.”

***

When Harry begins the second term of his fourth year, it’s clear that more has changed due to his mastery than he could have ever imagined.

He enters the art room anxious to get back to his paintings that are half-finished or not begun but begging to be created. When he reaches his station, he finds it empty. His canvases and paints and little knick-knacks are gone.

Beatrice’s station is as clean and filled as ever, and so are the stations of everyone else in the class. Harry’s station alone has been purged and Harry begins to feel tears grow in his eyes. Everything he’s worked on is just… gone.

He strides out of the empty classroom and walks with purpose to Professor Badgerwood's office.

He knocks on the door, bangs really, before the door swings open. Professor Bagerwood smiles at Harry warmly. "Come in, then."

Harry enters. "Professor, all my things are gone. I mean the canvases and the paints and the brushes and the paintings and — and — and I'm not sure what to do or where they went or who took them or what happened and how could you let this happen and —"

"Harry." Professor Badgerwood's voice is strong and demanding. "Stop panicking. Would I ever let your masterpieces be taken from you?"

"No," Harry says meekly.

"No," Professor Badgerwood echoes. "I would not. So, would you like me to tell you what happened?"

"Yes please," Harry says.

Professor Badgerwood exits his office and bids Harry come with him. "You see, you have your mastery now. You can't have expected to remain in *class* after that, could you?"

"Why not?" Harry asks.

"Oh," Professor Badgerwood says, "oh. Of course, you did. You know precious little about masteries. You are now, in the eyes of the law, an

adult due to your mastery. You are an authority on matters regarding Enchanted Artistry. You are recognized as a master of one of the most selective disciplines in the magical world. Your status has been elevated immeasurably. It's why so few people are selected every year. I heard through the grapevine that there were three people given consideration for masteries this year in Geneva. You, Harry, were the only one to pass. But there's more."

Harry blinks, trying to understand what more would look like.

His professor continues his lecture even as he and Harry wind further up into the tower on a staircase Harry swears he's never seen before. "Hogwarts recognizes masters as adults in need of space to practice their craft. Even if Professor Snape were for some reason to become a teacher of something other than potions, his mastery in potions would mean the castle would provide a space for him to continue his brewing. Of course, if he were to teach something like defense, he could just use the defense office for that purpose."

"Okay," Harry says, unsure of where this is going. He and his professor arrive in front of a purple door Harry's sure is new.

"You, as a student and not a professor, had no classroom or space belonging solely to you. The school rectified this." Professor Badgerwood swings the door open.

A moderate-sized room greets Harry. His paintings are all displayed on its walls. Huge numbers of paints and supplies are organized in cabinets. There are three tall windows in the room. There are easels and cushions and his glass of overflowing butterbeer on a small table.

Harry steps through the doorway. "What — who — what?"

Professor Badgerwood laughs. “This is your studio. The door will always open for you. It’s bigger than my studio, actually. The castle clearly thinks you outrank me as an artist. You are no longer my student. You are my peer. You are technically the peer of every teacher in this school, in fact. You’re Hagrid’s better. This has never happened before, of course, because there has never been a master so young.”

Harry stares at the bright and open space and can’t help the smile that spreads across his face. “So what? I don’t have art class anymore and I can just paint here whenever I feel like it?”

“Precisely. Congratulations, Master Potter.” Professor Badgerwood ruffles Harry’s hair. “I couldn’t be prouder.”

Harry looks back at the door of the room. It now reads, “Studio of Master Potter.” He feels warm and fond. “Thanks, professor.”

“Oh come now,” Professor Badgerwood says, “I just said we’re peers. I’m not your professor any longer. Call me Ezekiel.”

“Alright then,” Harry says and shocks Professor Badgerwood by giving the man a quick hug, like the way he would Sirius. “Thanks, Ezekiel.”

Ezekiel Badgerwood pats the back of his former student awkwardly but fondly. “You are most welcome, Harry.”

***

His teachers all react to his mastery differently. Professor McGonagall gives Harry a rare smile and calls him “Master Potter,” instead of

“Mister Potter.” Beyond that, her attitude is the same as it was prior to his mastery.

Professor Flitwick insists Harry call him “Fillius,” and offers to amend the charms curriculum Harry studies in order to be of most service to his craft.

“I think you and I both know what career you will pursue as an adult. As your peer and your professor, my role is to best prepare you for your future. I see no need to treat you like every other student. You are not like every other student. I will treat you as you are, and what you are is a master of Enchanted Artistry. Tell me how I can help you the most.”

Harry had been rather flustered and responded, “Erm. I’m happy to just go along with everyone else though?”

Fillius Flitwick nodded. “Alright, then. But remember Harry, you let me know if you change your mind.”

Professor Bagerwoord… Ezekiel asks Harry for advice on a few of his portraits. “I’m having such a hard time getting the hair right on this one, see her curls aren’t standard and I’m not sure what to do.”

Harry, shockingly, helps. “Oh, I see the problem. You need to make sure you get the light patterns right. Your shadows are all wrong with her hair. Here, let me paint you a quick sample…”

Harry is on his way to his first post-mastery potions class when Tom grabs him in the hall. When Tom complains about stares, it’s all Harry can do to not roll his eyes. “Cry me a river,” he says. Harry knows the pain of lingering stares and is getting more than his fair share after his mastery. He hates the attention, and Tom loves it. Unfairly, Harry

wishes that Tom disliked the attention as much as Harry does so they could understand each other. Still, he gives Tom a kiss and a wink before he continues on to potions class.

He walks in less than a minute late but Snape levels him with a malevolent glare. " *Mister Potter* ," Snape says in a cool tone. "How kind of you to join us at long last."

Draco, probably meaning to be helpful, corrects Snape. "Oh! Haven't you heard? He's not 'Mister Potter' anymore, but 'Master Potter!'"

Snape's tone of voice, if possible, turns colder until it sounds positively icy. "Oh yes, I've heard all about the little boy claiming to be a master."

Harry shuffles to his workstation hoping Snape will stop talking and move on to the class. His prayers are left unanswered.

"Tell me, *Master Potter* ," Snape says in a clearly mocking tone, "Do you think you are my peer now? In your arrogance, do you think we are equals?"

"No," Harry says. "Not in all respects, at any rate."

"Not in all respects," Snape echoes with a sneer. He turns back to the class. "Today we will be brewing a simple pain-relieving potion. This potion should be easy for fourth-year students and I expect better than your typical disappointing concoctions."

Harry squints at the board and is about to go grab supplies when Snape says, "Master Potter of course is above such material. You will

brew something else entirely."

Harry feels sweat collect at the back of his neck. Potions has never been his best subject. "What will I be brewing?"

Snape gives Harry a dark smile. "You will attempt to brew Glacial Anesthesia. Brewed correctly, it will freeze wounds and make surgery painless. Brewed incorrectly, it has a nasty habit of freezing the brewer instead. Don't worry, you'll likely only lose your hand from the frost before someone can get you to Madame Pomphrey in the unlikely event of a mishap."

Hermione leaps out of her seat, "You can't make Harry brew that!" She shouts.

"Ten points from Gryffindor and you will find that I can."

"It's an abuse of power."

"Come now, Miss Granger. It's no such thing. I'm simply giving Master Potter the respect he deserves."

"I'm a Master of Enchanted Artistry. Not potions," Harry manages. His hands are shaking.

"And yet, in your arrogance, you have declared yourself my equal. I am merely treating you as such."

"I have never claimed to be your equal," Harry says.

Snape inclines his head and looks smug, “Indeed. You are not. Not in any respect. Compared to me and the other professors at this school, you are insignificant. You may brew the painkiller potion with the rest of the students, *Mister* Potter.”

Harry breathes in and then breathes out. The unfairness of everything is getting to him. He didn’t ask to become a master or a champion or the boy who lived and he can’t stand the barbs today. “I don’t think I will.”

Snape’s face turns thunderous. “Do not think yourself capable of brewing Glacial Anesthesia. You and I both know otherwise.”

“I’m not. I’m not going to brew that. I’m just, I’m done,” Harry says, staring down at his hands.

“Pardon?” Snape says.

Harry lifts his head and meets Snape’s eyes. “I’m done. I’m done with this class and your threats and whatever weird jealousy you’ve got going on right now.” Harry looks away.

“100 points from Gryffindor!” Snape explodes, “You are worth less than your father, and let me tell you, Potter, like you he was no savior. He made the dirt on the bottom of my shoe look like diamonds in comparison to what he was worth.”

Harry’s anger is glacial as he looks into Snape’s soul. “If you’re going to judge me by my parents, you ought to judge me by my mother as well,” he says faux placidly. “But I’d rather you’d judge me by my actions. After all, I doubt you’d like it if I judged you by your father.”

Snape pales and vibrates with rage. His voice comes out in a furious whisper. “Potter, you will leave this classroom and you will never return.”

Harry stands and gives Snape a respectful bow. “Goodbye, Professor.” He slips out of the classroom and heads to Dumbledore’s office. He’s sure the potions class is in shambles now and that news of this will spread like wildfire.

But in the headmaster’s office, Dumbledore awards Harry150 points to Gryffindor for being the youngest Master in history.

“Severus is merely feeling displaced, you understand. He is the youngest potions master, but you are the youngest master across all disciplines. He is a genius, but you, my boy, are more than a genius and prodigy. You are creation itself. Severus could never make such a claim despite all his creations.”

“Right, I get that. But I was wondering if, as a master, I might be able to self-study potions? I don’t think I’m welcome in Snape’s class any longer.”

“Professor Snape, Harry. And yes,” Dumbledore says, “go right ahead. I can hardly compel you to take any classes at this point as the school recognizes you as both a student and an adult and seems content to allow you to do as you will so long as you have the time to paint. I imagine Ezekiel will be able to help you with potions. They were always his second-best subject and he used his knowledge to get his mastery, you know. He made a whole new color that should have been red and acted like red but wasn’t red in the ways that matter. Brilliant man, Ezekiel is.”

“Erm. Yes. I knew about that.”

“Good, good. Well, that’s settled then. I wish you luck in the second task next week. Is there anything else?”

“Oh,” Harry says, shocked at how quickly everything was resolved, “no. That’s it really.”

“Excellent news,” Dumbledore says. “Now I shall just have to bring this excellent news to Severus and then I will be free to go and eat honeycombs in peace.”

***

News of Harry dropping potions does indeed spread like wildfire and reaches a burning inferno by dinner that first day. The story is embellished constantly and consistently to the point that some of the younger years legitimately believe Harry was cursed to death by Snape and rose from the ashes of his own demise like some kind of divine human Phoenix.

Tom may spur some of these rumors along, especially the ones which paint Snape in a poor light. He has no patience for someone who means Harry harm.

That the Daily Prophet somehow catches wind of Harry’s dramatic exit and publishes a new story about Harry Potter’s incredible mastery and his use of “newfound confidence to escape years of emotional abuse suffered at the hand of a former Death Eater,” helps to only increase curiosity around the whole thing.

Two nights before the second task, Tom is called to speak with the committee members for the tournament.

“For the second task, we will be taking the most precious person to each of our champions. You would be placed in a kind of slumber underwater. There will be no harm to you, even if the champions don’t know that. Do you agree to do this?” Bagman asks Tom.

Tom grins like he is something feral. “I do.”

That night, he studies with single-minded efficiency and determines the six sleeping spells the committee is going to use and the easiest ways to counter each of them.

The night before the task, a little first year with insomnia allows him into the Gryffindor common room because Hufflepuffs are welcome everywhere. The Fat Lady rolls her eyes but does not protest.

Tom enters silently into the fourth-year Boy’s Dormitory and gently pulls back Harry’s curtains to slide into bed with his darling. He pulls the curtains closed.

Harry stirs as Tom slips under the covers. “Whussgoingon?” He slurs out, hair mussed.

Tom kisses the back of Harry’s neck. “Shh, go back to sleep sweetheart.”

Harry snuffles once or twice and snuggles back into his duvet and further into Tom’s arms before his breathing evens out. Tom closes his eyes and allows himself to sleep. He’ll leave before Harry wakes in the

morning.

***

Harry wakes up the day of the second task alone in bed despite being sure Tom had somehow joined him last night. Harry can't help but feel it's further proof he's falling in love. *What a dork I am. I'm even dreaming of him now.*

Ron forces Harry to eat more breakfast than he was planning to eat (which was none, thank you) and the twins salute Harry as a legend, which they've been doing every day since he walked out/was kicked out of potions.

Tom is nowhere to be found. Something like dread settles low and heavy in Harry's stomach. He realizes Hermione isn't around either. The feeling intensifies.

Harry's plan to do nothing for the task seems to personally offend Professor Moody. Professor Moody pulls Harry aside and makes a big stink before the task that Harry really should have paid more attention to the egg and figured it out but he presses gillyweed into Harry's hand and says, "eat that, Potter. It'll help you breathe."

Harry's quite certain that it would be cheating if he did eat it, but he's now certain that the task will have something to do with the ominous lake.

When Harry and the other champions are told that something precious to them has been taken, Harry looks around wildly for Tom. His boyfriend is nowhere to be found. Hermione hasn't joined Ron in the stands either. Cho Chang is missing and so is Fleur's little sister. For some reason, Percy is filling in for Mr. Crouch.

The champions are told they have a time limit to retrieve what was taken from them. Harry realizes with certainty that it's not "what was taken" and rather "who."

Anger rises in Harry when the signal goes off. All three other champions immediately dive into the lake. Harry does not. He sits on the dock.

It's a dark day. The sky is grey and the clouds are heavy with the threat of rain. Harry is reminded of his painting of steps on the top of a frozen lake.

He lets his anger spread to his wand and summons his sketchbook and pen wordlessly. He begins to sketch out the lake quickly. He's sketched this lake before — back when he was making Tom worlds.

He sketches the familiar waves with dark ink and does not feel joy as his fingers fly across the page. He feels something like energy rise up into his wrist and crackle at his fingertips. He's a master of art now. Beyond that, his paintings and drawings have always toed the line between fantasy and reality. He's been balanced on the edge of a sharp knife for over two years. *What if I tip over?*

Harry knows Tom's soul like the back of his own hand. He knows where it's made of flowers and where it's made of Harry's own graphite and where it's still chained by something slightly rotten.

Harry sketches a bridge of ice across the top of the lake and allows his fingers to guide him to where he knows Tom's soul is buried under the waves' surface.

Then, with a growing sense of trepidation, he places one hand on his journal and the other on the surface of the lake. He feels the cool water on his hand.

There's no spell Harry recites. He just lets that curious energy crackle until it begins to coalesce around the journal. The ink spreads from Harry's left hand and colors his veins black, passing by his heart and out through his left hand to where it rests on the lake. The ink spreads out black until it is dispersed by the gentle waves. The lake goes still.

Then… there is a sound like a distant crunch.

Ice spreads out from Harry's hand over the surface lake, strong and glittering. It makes a bridge stopping almost halfway across the body of water.

Harry sets his journal and pen down on the dock and steps onto the ice. It holds his weight.

He walks across the lake on his bridge. He feels Tom's soul getting closer and does not turn to look when he sees a blonde head emerge from the water shouting.

He's focused in a way he's never been before. When he reaches the end of the bridge he bites down on the gillyweed he was given and dives down, down, into the depths of the black water. He feels air passing through near gills unnaturally but pays the sensation no mind.

Tom is floating near the surface right where Harry dove down. He is tied by something and Harry goes to free him from the ropes. There are mermen all around with tridents but Harry could care less about them.

When Harry's gotten Tom free, he sees Gabrielle, the little sister of Fleur, similarly tied. Cho and Hermione are gone so Cedric and Krum must have succeeded in the time it took Harry to draw the bridge and walk across it. Harry knows there are about four minutes before the time limit ends.

Harry doesn't know what would happen to the little girl if she stays underwater past the time limit, but he doesn't like it. He pulls Tom behind him and goes to free her as well.

Several things happen at once. A merman puts his trident to Harry's neck. A single speck of blood drifts from Harry's neck into the water. Tom's eyes open. Harry and Gabrielle are blasted backward.

For a moment everything is black.

When Harry opens his eyes, it's to the sight of the arm of the merman who had held a trident to his neck drifting in the water. The trident is sinking to the bottom of the lake. The merman is elsewhere and blood is everywhere. Harry sees Tom glowing silver and surrounded by heaps of merman who are advancing on him.

Tom is casting curses left and right and Harry realizes that Gabrielle and himself are in danger when several mermen start swimming toward them. With a burst of speed, Harry pulls the little girl with him up to the surface and heaves himself onto the ice bridge before quickly pulling her to safety. She gasps shakily in the air and blinks wetly. "Quelque chose ne va pas," she whispers.

Harry doesn't know what that means but time is not on their side. He tells her, "Run to the end of this bridge and call for help."

She nods, “Oui,” and begins speeding off. Harry can barely breathe in the air and he shoots red sparks into the sky before diving back down into the water.

He positions himself at Tom’s back and casts summoning charm after summoning charm, collecting the weapons of the merman and launching them up to the surface. Tom is casting more creatively and some of the mermen are turned into harmless fish, others are covered in boils, and still more are simply paralyzed as they drift in the current. It’s clear to Harry that he and Tom are going to lose soon and he tries to pull Tom to the surface so they can escape but Tom is still glowing silver and refuses to be moved. He seems half-conscious. Harry feels fear then and doesn’t cast a spell fast enough to summon the spear of a merman. His abdomen is impaled and he cries out.

Tom spins in the water and something like pure energy pours out of him. The head of the merman who skewered Harry comes clean off and Harry screams into the water as he is covered in blood.

His vision is going hazy when he hears a shocking boom. He blinks blearily at the sight of someone else in the water.

Dumbledore, he realizes vaguely. Dumbledore has jumped into the lake and he’s cast something like a bubble around Harry and Tom. He carries them both to the bridge and sets them there before slipping beneath the waves. Tom stops glowing and falls to his knees.

Harry can’t really sit up. He’s cold and there’s a spear in his stomach. Tom’s face is frantic.

“They hurt you,” he’s saying. “You’re bleeding,” he scoops Harry up in his arms like Harry is a weightless bride instead of someone bleeding very heavily and takes off in a sprint toward the dock.

Harry's head lulls to one side as Tom runs. There are still explosions happening under the water. Tom's voice repeats as if he is praying, "You'll be okay, you'll be okay, they'll fix you, you'll be okay."

As Tom and Harry reach the end of the ice bridge, the lake is still once more. As soon as Harry and Tom reach the dock, Madam Pomfrey is shouldering past everyone with a blanket.

As soon as she sees Harry's stomach and the spear and the blood, her mouth presses into a thin line.

"I apologize Master Potter, but I'm going to need to put you in a rather complicated stasis."

"Goforit," he slurs.

As she's casting, Dumbledore flies out of the water and catapults onto the dock. He emerges from the lake dripping and grim. His robes ripple around his frame and there is a single cut on his cheek. Harry recalls suddenly that Dumbledore is one of the most powerful wizards alive.

" *What have you done?* " He asks Tom.

"What have *you* ?" Tom retorts.

Harry feels rather like he is in a tunnel all of a sudden. His vision is spotty. Harry blinks.

“…The treaty with the merpeople is null now.”

Harry blinks.

“…attacked….bleeding…”

Harry blinks.

“…you murdered…”

Something warm comes over Harry. He feels like he’s going to fall down but then he realizes he’s already on the ground.

“…students…”

Harry blinks. He can barely see anything. It’s getting harder to hear.

“…self defense!”

Harry closes his eyes to the blurry sight of Madam Pomfrey’s wand, Tom crouched around him protectively, and the horrified eyes of Albus Dumbledore. Harry welcomes the darkness.

Chapter End Notes

Snape, oh Snape. Some of you may be wondering, "What crawled

up his arse? He seemed like he was doing better," and yes, yes he was. But Snape in canon is a rather vindictive man and he is prone to fits of temper, especially with matters regarding harry. I doubt he would have taken well to Harry getting a mastery even if he on the whole in Dripping Fingers likes Harry more than Canon!Snape does. So. Snape here is not meant to OOC and this felt very in character to me. He never actually intended for Harry to brew the dangerous potion, he just wanted to prove that Harry is not his peer and make the boy back down and gain some humility. That's why when Harry says he won't brew the painkiller, Snape is like "dude you actually aren't capable of brewing something fancier than fourth-year material, calm down," and Harry's like, "my man, you've misunderstood. I'm done with YOU."

If you want nice OOC Snape who is super kind to Harry, check out my other fic "another mind game."

What's going on with Tom? Well, that will be answered but quite a bit. He didn't mean to murder anyone but he is a very dangerous gremlin.

And now for the first preview ever: next chapter Sirius talks to Tom and Tom talks to moaning Myrtle

Please leave a comment or a kudos if you feel so inclined. You may not know this, but I am a commentarian. I eat comments exclusively.

Myrtle

Chapter Notes

> Hello everyone! Happy Holidays! I made it through finals and now I have time to hang out with family which is lovely. I hope everyone is having a great end to their year! Holidays can be hard because families and not having much family can be hard, so I hope that you all find something wonderful and peaceful this holiday season.
>
> I have found a deep love for peppermint hot chocolate. It is delightful and I highly recommend it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This beautiful artwork was made by AO3's Mariana_OOC. Her Twitter is also Mariana_00C. This gorgeous piece is an image of Lily's tombstone from the Petunia interlude.

No. It was anger. It was fury mixed with something decidedly sad.

When Harry wakes up, it's dark outside. He takes a moment to catalog the shadows on the walls and the view of the field from the windows. He's not in his bed back in Gryffindor tower. He's in the hospital wing. He lies back down against the cushions and groans.

As if summoned, Madame Pomfrey bustles into the room. She looks at Harry's open eyes and gasps. "Master Potter! You are awake!"

Harry says, "Yes? It would appear so, certainly."

Madame Pomfrey puts her hand to her chest and breathes out a greatly relieved exhale. "We weren't — I wasn't — well, we weren't sure you would… make it."

"Make what?"

"It out alive, Master Potter. We weren't sure you would live past the —" Madame Pomfrey gestures vaguely to Harry's chest region and mimes him being stabbed. "Well, you remember."

Harry feels a troubling sense of foreboding. "How long," Harry swallows and his mouth is dry, "How long was I out?"

"Just about four and a half days. We almost had to transfer you to St. Mungo's. And… There's no easy way to say this, but you did die, Master Potter. It was only for a second. During operation. We were vanishing the spear and attempting to replenish your blood and heal your organs all at once you see, and the diagnostic said you had… died."

"But I'm not dead, am I?"

"No! No. You're alive and fit as a fiddle. I did some of my best work with your organ regrowth. You might be healthier than you were before, even."

Harry looks down at his wrist. The green emerald in the bracelet Tom gave him is split clean down the middle. “So how did I live past dying?”

Madame Pomfrey purses her lips and looks extremely discomfited. “I think you should go back to sleep, young man.”

“ *How,* Madame Pomfrey?” Harry pushes, making his voice strong and hard.

“We don’t know,” She admits.

“And who is ‘we?’” Harry asks.

“Ah, Severus and I.”

Harry digests this information. Then he recalls suddenly and vividly Dumbledore and Tom and the merpeople and sits straight up. “Where’s Tom?”

Madame Pomfrey continues to look markedly uncomfortable. “He’s with Pomona right now.”

“Why?”

“Nothing you need to be worried about, young man. She’s just helping him work through some things. ”

Harry feels incredibly concerned.

****

What have you done? Dumbledore had asked him. Feeling Harry's life-force crackle and dim, Tom had responded, “What have *you* done?”

Seated exceedingly stiff-backed in Dumbledore’s office, Tom has never been angrier in his life.

Dumbledore has not said anything for the past several moments and is just staring at Tom in a cool, disappointed, and calculating expression. There is no sparkle held in his irises just now. Tom had almost forgotten how the man used to always look at him. It was just like this. Tom is being looked at as though he is nothing less than a monster. Dumbledore’s assumptions hurt more now than they did before Tom was reborn because he has seen the other side of the great Albus Dumbledore. He knows what it’s like to have this man’s regard.

“Why?” Dumbledore says at last. He sounds resigned and beaten down. The word cuts through the silence like a whip.

“They hurt Harry.” The words hang in the air but Tom decides they are not enough. “They killed him.”

Dumbledore pales. “They did no such thing.”

“If it wasn’t for me, he would be dead! And you did nothing to stop them until it was too late. You failed us.”

“Don’t lie to me, Tom,” Dumbledore says. “Not now. I know you.”

“Ask your precious Poppy what’s happening right now as they try to save Harry. He’s got a spear in his stomach. Anyone can see my magic reaction in self-defense.”

“Self defense and murder are two very different things.”

“It wasn’t murder! Don’t call it that. That’s *not* what it was.”

“Tom –” The door to Dumbledore’s office is thrust open with such force it bangs into the stone wall. Sirius stands in the open frame strong and furious. His eyes are sharp and hard as steel. He wears a snarl.

“And since when was it appropriate for a *teacher* to question one of his students without a guardian present?”

Dumbledore opens his mouth, clearly taken aback. He rallies and says, “Tom has reached his majority.”

Sirius strides forward and summons a chair. He sinks into the chair directly next to Tom and throws one leg over the other. “I don’t give a rat’s fucking ass, old man. I’m Tom’s guardian. I’m the *only* family this goddamn kid has in the world and I swear to Merlin, you didn’t do shit for me when I was imprisoned in Azkaban. I was there for what, twelve years? It’s so easy for you to look at us Blacks and ‘dark’ Pureblood and believe the worst, isn’t it? But I’m here this time. I refuse to let Tom be falsely found guilty of anything.”

Dumbledore looks grave. “I am sorry for what happened to you.”

Sirius leans forward. “Then don’t make the same mistake twice.”

Dumbledore says, “I understand how you feel. However, Sirius, Tom killed a Merperson. This cannot be denied. I am trying to determine if Tom’s actions were murder and if he needs to be expelled.”

"Oh yeah, because clearly, the person at fault in this situation is the student and not the adults who thought it was reasonable to put comatose children into water filled with violent merpeople. I mean, you had the well-meaning assumption that absolutely nothing could possibly go wrong. " Sirius snorts. "This entire tournament stinks of child abuse and endangerment, but by all means, place the blame of this shitshow on Tom and absolve yourself of any guilt.”

Dumbledore sighs. “The tournament is out of my control. If I could, I would have saved all the participants from the day’s event but –”

“Hogwarts did not need to agree to this tournament. Don’t pretend everything that went down was out of your hands.” Sirius thrums his fingers against his knees. “Tom,” he asks, “Can you tell us what happened?”

Tom has to swallow around the sudden lump in his throat. It shouldn’t make him feel anything that Sirius has come here to defend him. He’s the one who altered the man’s brain a year ago. But this may be the first time someone has come and defended Tom so strongly. He’s warm despite himself and hears a quiet voice promise *It's not love.* Another voice calls out more loudly (and sounding like Hermione) *Isn’t it?*

Tom decides that vague and traumatized is the best tone for telling

this story, “I woke up and saw a Merperson with his trident to Harry’s throat. Harry was bleeding. I just wanted the merperson to leave Harry alone so I blasted its arm. Then all the Merpeople started attacking us and I defended us to the best of my ability. One of them speared Harry through his stomach and everything just kind of went… fuzzy. It felt like this great bit of energy ripped through me and then… then the Merperson was dead.”

“Self-defense. Plain and simple,” Sirius says. “No court will convict Tom for this.”

“Most courts of wizards care little about ‘creatures,’ Merpeople included,” Dumbledore responds, dryly. “I doubt a wizard court would convict Tom even if he murdered a werewolf in cold blood.”

“And that’s my problem, how?” Sirius asks.

“I thought you and Remus –”

“If that werewolf were Remus, it would be my problem. But right now, Tom is my child and I fail to see how his saving my godson from his death is grounds for expulsion.”

“I’ll submit memories or take veritaserum or something,” Tom says, “I swear to you. It was self-defense.”

A doe Patronus comes through the door. Sirius stares transfixed and mouths, “Lily.”

The doe speaks with Snape's clipped voice, “The boy died in operation. We’re doing our best to revive him. Open the floo to

Mungo's in case we need to transfer him."

Dumbledore, Tom, and Sirius stand at exactly the same time. "He died…no…" Sirius is saying. Dumbledore is saying something else. Tom runs out of the office and heads to the infirmary. Harry's wearing his bracelet. It's okay. He can die once. He'll revive. It will be okay.

When Tom reaches the infirmary, the doors are locked. Dumbledore and Sirius arrive shortly after. Dumbeldore unlocks the door and walks inside, Sirius and Tom hot on his heels.

Harry is encased in a glowing bubble as Pomfrey and Snape work, but his chest is rising and falling.

"He came back to life," Snape announces. "He should, by all rights, be dead."

"Organs in bad shape though," Pomfrey says. "We need to move quickly."

Dumbledore's eyes stray to the bracelet on Harry's wrist. Tom follows the sightline and sees the emerald has split clean in two.

"Do you believe me now?" Tom whispers to Dumbledore.

"Self-defense," Dumbledore says. "Yes, I can see that now." He looks at the bracelet once more. "Yes, this clarifies a good deal of questions."

Pomfrey shoos Sirius and Tom out of the hospital wing shortly after.

Sirius tucks Tom under one arm even though they're the same height as they walk down the halls.

"He'll pull through," Sirius says to Tom. It's clear that Sirius needs to hear those words.

"I know. Harry's strong."

"He is. So are you. I'm proud of you, kid. You probably saved Harry's life. But killing people sticks with you. If you need to talk to someone, I'm here for you."

Tom doesn't know what's going on with them. He feels like a newborn. He feels like he's standing on legs that are just learning to walk. He clears his throat. "I don't really think I meant to kill anyone today."

Sirius squeezes Tom's neck encouragingly. "Sometimes, that's all that matters."

"Yeah?" Tom asks.

"Yeah."

Tom bites down on his lips. He's sick of lying all the time and this knife hanging over his heart. He has this concern that all this – everything with Sirius – will come crashing down the moment Sirius learns the truth. He doesn't want a facsimile of love or family. It's too much. It's tearing Tom apart. It's as if he has everything he wished for desperately back in the days of the orphanage when he used to dream in the dead of the night that someone would come and save him and

love him. He never let himself dwell on the dreams long, but he thinks every child lying cold and alone in moth-bitten blankets wonders what it would feel like to have a family.

Tom pulls Sirius into an open classroom. There are maps all over the walls and constellations on the ceiling. The light glow filters down over the whole space. Hands shaking, Tom casts a silencing charm.

“I need to tell you something,” Tom says. “I don't know what you’ll do, but I just need you to know.”

Sirius crooks an eyebrow. “Alright then, go on.”

“I – I altered your mind. A year and a half ago over the summer, I learned who you were and I changed your mind to make you believe my story about who I am. I’m not a Black. I’m not your nephew or your relative. I’m no one to you. And I made you think I was. I’m – I’m – I apologize.”

Tom looks at the floor, bracing for the raging anger he sees sometimes when Sirius is drinking. He instead gets a heavy hand on his shoulder.

“I know.”

Tom looks up, shocked. “What? How? What?”

“I’ve been seeing mind healers for months, Tom. They tell you all sorts of things. ‘Pretty intense mind alteration you got going on there, better clean that right up.’ I didn’t tell you I knew at first because I wasn’t sure if you’d alter my mind again. I didn’t know who I was dealing with and I still don’t, but I think I’m safe now. I don’t know

where you come from, Tom. I don't need you to tell me. Because kid, trust me, I know what it's like to be desperate for a family. I've watched you like a hawk for a long time, watching in case you slipped up and hurt either Harry or me, but you didn't. You care for Harry fiercely. You like Hermione. You levitate me to bed when I'm drunk and fucking tuck me in. If that's not family, what is? I was waiting for you to come clean about this and you did. I'm proud of you, Tom. You're messed in the head, but you're mine. So, I guess, if you'd like to be a real family with me, I'll write you into the will."

Tom shakes his head and steps back. "It can't be this easy."

Sirius takes a step forward and tugs Tom into his arms. "Family should always be this easy. You're a Black because I say so. That's all there is to it."

Tom feels five years old. He's shivering underneath his bed terrified that one of the older boys will come in and drag him out of the place he's hiding. He's wishing desperately that someone will come and save him.

Tom is seventeen years old and clutching onto Sirius like a lifeline. Tomorrow he will grow up and wield his wand. Tomorrow he will be the man who severed the head of a Merperson because it dared to try and kill Harry. But for right now… right now he allows himself to be held. He allows Sirius to pull him out of the dark space under the bed and save him.

***

The day before Harry is released from the hospital, Trelawney comes to visit him. She manages to shoo off Madame Pomfrey.

Encased in a bubble of protective charms, Trelawney looks uncharacteristically somber.

“You’ve gotten their interest,” She says.

“Who is interested? In what?”

“The ministry is interested in you. What you did during the task is uncommon magic. Whatever you're doing with souls and art goes beyond that which has ever been seen before. I’m telling you right now, you need to make everyone think you transfigured the water. You just froze it somehow. Your art had nothing to do with it. Wizards do terrible things to people capable of magic they don’t understand.”

“But I thought I needed to make the world think that I was just a good painter.”

“It’s one thing to be a good painter. It’s another thing entirely to be able to paint your imagination into the real world. You can’t let anyone know that’s what you’re doing. Not even Ron Weasley.”

Harry says, “But he’s my best friend.”

Trelawney narrows her eyes. “I don’t get involved in the future very often. But I need you to listen to me right now. I am a seer. I’m telling you to trust me. Don’t tell anyone about what your art can do. Not Ron. Not Dumbledore. Not even Sirius. Promise me.”

Harry looks into Trelawney and sees fear reflected over every surface of her soul. She’s seen something in Harry’s future that frightens her. Harry sees fire licking the walls of Hogwarts. He sees his head bowed

with his eyes green glazed and unseeing. There are shackles on his wrists and his hair is matted with dirt. A man in silken robes kneels in front of him and places a pale hand underneath Harry's chin. Harry doesn't know what the man says, but Harry in the vision shakes his head and starts to tremble.

Harry blinks. "Okay," he tells Trelawney. He's shaking and feels Trelawney's fears himself. "I promise."

***

He's drawn to an abandoned, dripping, smelly, cold lavatory. He found it when he was sixteen years old. The stall doors are slightly too short. There's always stagnant water on the floors. There's a snake on one of the faucets. Someone died here, lost all their ambitions, was reviled instead of getting the chance to grow up. That's Tom's fault.

Tom stands in the doorway of the lavatory taking in how damp and ugly everything is. The mirror is smudged and the sinks are dripping water onto the floor. There's a bone-deep chill. The lights flicker. As much as Tom has tried to pretend that killing the Merperson hasn't impacted him at all, it has.

He's been reminded of the death (murder) that happened here in this girl's lavatory. He remembers the rush of power he felt when he killed a fourteen-year-old girl and watched her body cool on the dirty tiled floor. He thought he became immortal that day. Tom went into a diary and was carried out of the lavatory by the self left in the world Above. The girl he murdered stayed curled up and lifeless and alone (abandoned).

There's the ghost of a girl crying in one corner of the lavatory. He did this, he reminds himself, feeling the pain of loneliness and something like shame covering him like the spikes of an iron maiden. This girl

gave her life for him to become trapped in a diary. But he got out of his prison, he lived. She died for him, and she never got a chance to live. She's been stuck here in this ugly, smelly, dirty bathroom for decades because of him. (Abandoned.)

So Tom walks into the lavatory. He knows it is irrational to think he can do anything for Myrtle now. He's the reason she's a ghost here. But he's learned in the last year or so what it feels like to be loved and alive. If he can make her feel that way for even a second… maybe he'd stop thinking of her so often. Maybe it would prove that he's not the monster he was. That he's not the kind of monster who could try to kill Harry, the kind of monster Dumbledore thinks he is.

The stalls are empty. No one comes here anymore. The girl's cries in the corner are loud and bitter and attention sinking. The noise is mostly for show. Myrtle is a lot like Tom and the whomping willow Harry drew for him when he began to come back to life, Tom thinks. She's a lonely, bitter, sad thing, pushing everyone away because she's terrified of being left alone again. She's only ever left alone. (Abandoned.)

It's Tom's fault she died. He wishes she hadn't.

If Tom ignores how he can see through her in certain places, Myrtle Warren looks exactly like she did in life. Her glasses are too big for her face, she has acne in unfortunate places, her hair is overly long. She looks *young.*

Tom doesn't know what to say to this girl. He doesn't say anything.

He waits.

She has her face buried in her knees but she looks up when Tom

approaches. After a few obligatory sobs, she raises her head. Her face transforms from one of sadness into one of immense hateful anger.

"You!" She all but spits. "You're the boy who came in here and spoke some different language and just as I came out to tell you to leave the *girl's* lavatory, I died! I just saw some big yellow eyes and then I was dead. Took me long enough, but I figured out what happened and what your pet is. Did you think it would be good fun to come here and look at me as a ghost now? Oh, come to take a look at 'moaning Myrtle,' have you? Come to gloat that you made me this way?" She splashes dirty water all over Tom's robes. He does his best not to flinch. He deserves this, he tells himself.

"No, that's not why I'm here," he says.

"No?" Myrtle parrots. "Well, are you here then to throw things at me for sport? The kids love to do that! 'Let's throw books at Myrtle because she can't feel it! Ten points if you can get it through her stomach. Fifty points if it goes through her head.' Does that sound like fun to you? Want to join in on that? What a fun game, I don't think. Even if I'm dead, I still have feelings!"

Tom clenches his fists. Fifty years she's been dead. People hated her when she was alive, and they've been cruel to her even in her death. "No, I don't want to do that either."

Myrtle keeps splashing Tom with water. "Why are you still here? You don't belong here, this is the girl's lavatory! This is my home now, thanks to you! Get out! Get OUT! I don't want you HERE!"

Tom raises his hand in surrender. "I'll go if that's what you really want."

Myrtle stops splashing Tom and stares at him. “...No,” she says at last. “Don’t go. I don’t want to be alone.”

Tom hated the mind-numbing isolation of the diary. He had no one to talk to and it made him miss even the people he hated. She’s just fourteen years old, Harry’s age, and he condemned her to loneliness for half a century. “Okay,” he says, feeling like his chest is being cleaved in two, “I’ll stay.”

Myrtle stares at Tom. “You killed me, didn’t you?” She asks.

Tom wishes more than anything at that moment that he could take it back, but he can’t. “I did,” he confirms.

Myrtle’s face screws up. “ *Why* ?” The word is charged with so much desperation and wondering and sadness. Tom thinks about how awful it must have been to have died and not have known why. He thinks about haunting this one bathroom in Hogwarts and driving students away and wondering for years, “Why did I die? Why did someone kill me? What did I do?”

Maybe it’s too honest. But Tom sinks to the floor, water sloshing, and leans his back against the tiled wall. “Because you were in the way.” It’s true. She was annoying and ugly and a muggle-born. She was right there when he was opening the chamber and it was the easiest thing to take her life. It took hours for her to be discovered and no one mourned her. Tom heard one person say that her death was probably a divine service to the rest of the student body. But now… Tom feels ill that he’s the reason this girl is dead. He was alone for so long and he’s gotten used to what it feels like to have adults who care about him, and friends, and what it feels like to fall in …love. Myrtle will never get that.

Tom’s hands start shaking and the mirror rattles. It’s wrong. She should have known all the things Tom is getting to know. “Myrtle,” he

says, the words pouring out of him without him thinking about them, “You should have known what it was like to make friends you’re going to care about for the rest of your life. You should have learned what it was like to put on acne cream and mascara. You should have graduated and gone on to do something amazing and fallen in love and shown up that girl Olive Hornby. You should have known what it was like to have your dad walk you down the aisle if that was something you wanted and known what it felt like to go grey. You should have grown up. You shouldn’t be here.”

This seems to unlock something in Myrtle and she begins to cry. It’s quiet this time and anguished. Little bits of water plink onto the ground. “Yeah? You really think so?”

Tom nods his head and gives Myrtle a bitter half-smile. “I really do.” Tom feels powerless. It was so easy to kill this girl. But no matter what he does, he can never bring her back to life. He can never give her the experience of the happy life he’s starting to get. He can never help her see the beauty of the world and learn what it’s like to be loved. There’s nothing he can do to make what he did better.

“I wanted that,” Myrtle admits. “I kept thinking about all the things I’d do. When I grew up. I was going to be someone. I was going to show everyone just who I could be.”

Tom feels a sense of kinship with Myrtle that’s fierce and takes him by surprise. “I wanted that too.”

Myrtle cocks her head, tears dripping down her cellophane face. “Yeah. I suppose all us unwanted kids did.”

“I suppose we did.” Myrtle’s robes were always too big in her life, and blue-trimmed Ravenclaw robes don’t fit her all the way here in her death either. “I’m sorry that I killed you, Myrtle.” Tom breathes out

and feels something squeeze tight in his chest. He feels remorse so strong he's trembling. There's regret lying heavy at the base of his spine. There's something deep inside him unfurling and he realizes what he said is not quite right. He looks at this young, dead girl, in her big eyes and says, "I'm sorry that you're dead, Myrtle. You should have lived."

She shouldn't be stuck here. If anyone deserves to be trapped in a gross, smelly, lavatory for eternity, it's Tom.

Myrtle's sobs increase. Shoulders shaking she says, "I think that's all I really wanted someone to tell me:'I'm sorry you're dead.' 'I wish you were alive.' Not: 'get away, creep,' or 'oh my gosh this bathroom is haunted.' You know, my mum was always a bit sick so she used to tell me that any day you can be strong, you gotta be strong, you know? She'd tell me, 'Myrtle, any time you let yourself have an easy way out you're gonna take it, so don't let yourself take the easy way out.' And I've been trying to hold on because I want to make her proud, you know? But people are so mean and it's so hard. I think I just wanted someone – after all these years – to tell me that they wished I wasn't dead. Because I wish that, Tom. I wish I wasn't dead."

Myrtle takes a trembling breath and says, "I've been strong for so long. How long has it been?"

"It's been fifty years."

"That's a long time, right?"

Tom can't even begin to imagine haunting this place for years just because of something his mother said to him. Then again, Tom never had a mother. This girl did, and he stole her daughter from her. He says, gently, "Fifty years is a very long time. You've been strong for more than long enough, I think."

Myrtle says, as though it's a great secret, "I really miss my mum."

She's just fourteen. Of course, she misses her mother. "I bet your mum misses you too."

Myrtle bows her head, shoulders shaking. "...Yeah. She would."

"I'm sure she does. I think your parents are waiting for you on the other side. They'll be so happy to see you."

"What if they're not?"

Tom's never had parents, but he's starting to learn what family is from Sirius. He's sure that this girl's parents mourned her even if no one at this school did. Her sickly mother probably spent nights crying until her pillowcase was stained with tears. Her father probably never smiled quite the same way. Tom's mother gave her life for him. Good parents, Tom thinks, and even the not-great ones, will always want their children to live. He's heard that the hardest thing a person can endure is losing their child. He imagines a muggle couple baking cookies and making the bed of their daughter that's ten years dead, wishing against all hope that she'll finally come home from school.

"I promise you," he says in a voice so confident it surprises him, "they will."

Myrtle says, "I'm scared."

Tom puts his hand over her incorporeal hand as if he could hold it.

“You’ve been in a haunted bathroom for the last fifty years. I guarantee that people here are much scarier than wherever you’re going.”

“Will you stay with me? Until I go?” Myrtle asks.

Tom can’t bring her back, but he can at least make sure she’s never alone again. (Never abandoned.) “Of course. It would be my honor.”

Myrtle turns away from him then and looks into the smudged mirror. In its reflection, Tom sees the dim face of a woman with wrinkles and glasses. He hears Myrtle's disbelieving laugh and for a second, she is beautiful and joyful and looks like the fourteen-year-old girl she should have been. For a fleeting moment, he swears he feels her hand, warm, sweaty, and alive. Then her hand leaves his.

Myrtles seems to fly into the mirror and directly into the open arms of that woman, holding her tight in a hug.

He hears Myrtle’s voice as if from in a far tunnel. “Mum? Mum! It’s really you. I've missed you so much.”

He hears another voice, deeper and joyful, answer. “Oh, my darling. You have no idea how happy I am to see you again –”

For a moment, all senses disappear. Tom no longer can feel his back against the wall, smell the musk of the restroom, taste tears on his tongue, see the water on the floor, hear the drops of the leaking sinks dripping down. His heart wrenches in two. All he knows is a searing kind of pain.

His senses return slowly. He feels his back against the cool tile. He tastes tears on his tongue. But he smells flowers. He opens his eyes and sees that roses and yarrow and daffodils have sprouted all across the lavatory. The mirror is smudge-free and the floor is shining and free of water.

He knows down to his soul that something irrevocable within him has shifted. It's as if he's been tethered to something rotten and he's just been cut loose. He looks up at the lavatory feeling like he's ten pounds lighter. And then he realizes that someone is missing.

Myrtle is gone.

***

There's a girl's lavatory on the first floor of Hogwarts. It's cold most of the time and the stall doors are a bit too short. People say it used to be haunted but it isn't now. Flowers grow in the sinks and it always smells sweet.

There's an inscription on the door. People say Tom Black wrote it.

"In loving memory of Myrtle Warren

1929-1943

She will be missed"

Chapter End Notes

Two Horcruxes have now been destroyed. The one that saved Harry's life (the diadem) is gone, and Tom's remorse over Myrtle cleansed him of his Horcruxness so that's it for the diary as well now.

The Myrtle scene has been around in my head for a long time. One of the things I disliked about the OG series is the treatment of Myrtle. She's an awkward fourteen-year-old girl, as so many of us are and were, and for that reason, we're supposed to dislike her? It was a tragedy when she died and I hope I showed that.

Also: Tom is a bit less like himself this chapter than usual. I promise that he will be back into his possessive gremlin self sooner rather than later. Still, he is growing and changing. He just killed someone and he's reflecting on his life. He's a bit off this chapter because he's shaken. He's more easily able to relate to Myrtle because she's Harry's age.

An author tip: this chapter has callbacks to chapter one. If you go back and re-read chapter one, you will see some similarities. Things from earlier chapters will continue to come up so keep your eyes out and get hyped!

Anywho leave a kudos if you feel so inclined, or a comment so I know I'm not writing into the void.

Affection

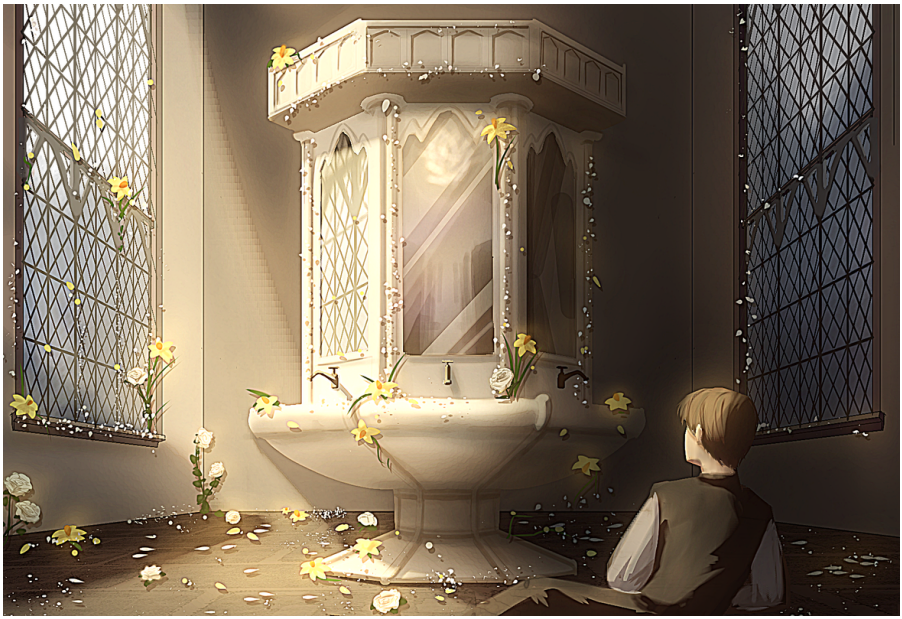
Chapter Notes

I highly suggest going back and reading chapter three. Or at least, the last bit of chapter three. It will make the last bit of this chapter more enjoyable.

I hope everyone is happy and healthy and have a wonderful day!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The above painting was made by A03's very own Ivysaturn. It's a phenomenal take on Charon's Ferry.



The above painting was made by Rocio A and depicts Myrtle's lavatory after she passes on to the other side. This may be one of the best uses of light I have ever seen in any artwork.

Sadness. It pierces through stagnant numbness. How novel.

Tom is soaked and chilled to his bones when he raises a shaking hand to the door of the lavatory. He can't just leave like this. There was a girl here, there was a *girl* here, a whole human that this school full of stone walls and revolving hordes of children is willing to forget. Tom is not willing to let her be forgotten. If she didn't get to live as a beloved someone, he's going to make sure that she will die as someone people care about. It's the last thing, the only thing, he can do for her.

Using his wand, he carves meticulous and elegant letters into the door. They are jagged in some places and rounded in others. His hands have a tremor and it's the best he can do. It's not enough. It will

never be enough. But it's something. He's doing something and moving forward, and he supposes that has to be how he'll get through the crushing weight of his past.

"In loving memory of Myrtle Warren

1929-1943

She will be missed"

When these sniveling masses of children who tormented a fellow child in pain and in death graduate, all that will remain of the memory of Myrtle Warren is this inscription on the door. As children visit the lavatory filled with flowers, maybe they will wonder about what a wonderful person Myrtle must have been, for her to be missed.

It's only as Tom begins climbing up the stairs that he realizes he is crying. He presses a hand to his cheek and almost recoils when he feels how damp it is. Teardrops collect on his fingertips until they are dripping.

He can't remember the last time he cried. It's been decades. Not since he was a child, and a young one at that.

Tom sniffs and tries to pull himself together. Harry is okay. Myrtle moved on. Sirius loves him. Everything is alright.

Even so, I can't stop wondering when the next blow will come. That kind of fear doesn't leave you just because the danger does.

Tom winds his way to the Records Room and casts a charm on himself that does nothing to reduce the chill.

With single-minded attention, he scours records trying to find any mention of Missy Damier, the woman who came to Hogwarts when was sixteen, got sorted into Slytherin, and saved thousands of muggles.

He finds nothing, nothing, nothing. Just when he's beginning to think that Missy Damier is nothing less than a tale told to him by Dumbledore, or worse, someone who was erased from history, his eyes catch on a record.

- Melissa D'Ambrosio. 1972-74. Slytherin. -

Found you. But why did Dumbledore get your name wrong?

Tom thinks he hears footsteps behind him as he makes his way to the great hall, but when he looks behind him, no one is there.

***

"Are you ready for your NEWTS, Tom? They're coming up quite shortly," Hermione says during dinner, passing Ron some roast vegetables he immediately discards. Almost everyone in the dining hall is staring at Tom as though he is a murderer. There will be an official announcement and likely a news article about the second task, etcetera etcetera, but for right now nothing's been done. Hermione, Ron, and Harry seem to be entirely uncaring of the current fear the rest of the student body is harboring toward Tom and Tom is content to ignore everyone.

“I think so, yes,” Tom says, picking up the roast vegetables and piling some onto Harry’s plate. “I’m hoping to set a record.”

“That sounds like you,” Harry mutters, spearing broccoli with his fork. Tom watches his artist with eagle-eyes until Harry lifts the fork to his mouth. He makes a face but ultimately does eat the vegetable.

Tom squeezes Harry's thigh under the table and murmurs, “Good boy.”

Harry flushes a brilliant red but Ron and Hermione are too busy arguing about the many benefits of vegetables to notice.

“They lower blood pressure and –”

“Well, so do potions.”

“Maybe so, but potions are not a replacement for a nutritious diet. You don’t have access to potions at the moment, but you have a whole host of vegetables you can eat.”

“I have meat too. And I’m eating that.”

Tom notices Harry’s stopped eating and begins feeding him small bites which Harry accepts almost on autopilot as he watches the drama unfold. Tom feels a rush of affection as Harry lets himself be taken care of by Tom. *I am the only person who will take care of you like this.*

“Do nutrients, vitamins, complex carbohydrates, fibers, and antioxidants mean *nothing* to you, Ronald? Well?”

“I don’t know if even half of what you said is English, to be honest, ‘Mione.”

“Well, you would if you ate your vegetables! They improve cognitive function.”

“Yeah now I know that’s not English. Cog•ni•tive. Sounds Latin to me.”

“I can’t! I try to help you and tell you what’s good and you just – just – you belittle me! Constantly. It’s like I’m talking to a brick wall.”

“Must be the red hair,” Ron says sagely.

Hermione releases a short little scream, stomps her foot, and stands abruptly. “That’s it! That is it. I’m eating with Krum today.”

“Oy! That’s with the Slytherins,” Ron says.

Ginny’s sitting a few people down and looks over in interest. “I’ll walk with you,” she says.

“Hey, no! No sitting with Malfoy,” Ron demands of his sister.

Ginny tosses her hair over a shoulder and grabs Hermione’s hand. “Let’s go somewhere away from this fool,” she says.

Hermione glowers at Ron. “That might be best.”

“Ginny! Don't talk about me like that. I am your brother.”

“I’ve only got about five others. That’s less impressive than it could be.”

And with that, the two of them flounce off.

Ron groans and lays his head on the table. “I didn’t do anything wrong, did I?” He asks. His voice is muffled.

“Not wrong, exactly. It’s just that I think you could have eaten some vegetables. Maybe said ‘thank you.’ She’d have liked that,” Harry advises.

“Yeah, yeah, give me the golden keys after the lock has left the building.”

“That’s not a saying, Ron,” Harry says.

Ron raises his head and levels Harry with a betrayed stare. “What happened to you being on my side?”

“I am on your side. I’m also on Hermione’s side. I won’t choose one of you over the other.”

“Fair. What about you, Tom? Are you on my side?” Ron gives Tom the

saddest attempt at puppy eyes Tom has ever had the misfortune to witness.

“No. I am firmly in Hermione’s camp.”

Ron curls his lip. “Fine then, be that way.”

After dinner, Tom finds Harry tugging his hand before he can return to the Hufflepuff dorms.

“Want something, dearest?” He asks.

Harry stares up at Tom. “Can you stay with me tonight?”

“I will.” Harry pulls Tom into an alcove and passes Tom the invisibility cloak.

“That’ll stop anyone from asking questions.”

It does. Tom still hears footsteps.

***

Moonlight filters through the cracks in the red curtains draping the bed. Harry’s heart beats to a steady rhythm, *bump, bump, bump.* Tom lies with his head on Harry’s chest as though he’s trying to commit the sound to memory. Harry traces carless patterns on Tom’s back with one finger, sketching out clouds and dragons and peacocks across

Tom's shoulder blades and spine.

"Sometimes I wish that I wasn't Harry Potter," Harry confesses as he stares up toward the red curtain covering his four-poster.

"Who do you wish you were instead?" Tom asks.

"I don't know. Just someone unknown. Maybe even a muggle. I sometimes wish that no one cared about what I did even a little bit. I used to dream that I had two normal parents, you know nothing special, just a mum and a dad who made tea in the morning and kissed me and then each other before they went to work. I think that would make me happy." Harry's never said it aloud, but he's been wishing for that simple and quiet kind of contentment since he was a little boy.

Tom presses a kiss to Harry's chest. "I try not to dwell on 'maybes' and the great 'what-ifs' of the universe. It is awful that you have to endure being famous and an orphan, but you can still be happy here, in the real world."

Harry sniffs. "I know. I *know*. It's just…I hate everything about my life every now and then. I'm famous for my mum and dad dying and surviving in spite of everything. And I hate it. I hate it! And no one ever lets me just hate it, you know? I'm supposed to be proud of my parents, and I am, I am, but sometimes I hate them for leaving me."

Harry puts his head and his hands and tugs at the roots of his hair sharply. "Doesn't that make an awful person? I hate my parents for being heroes."

Tom sits up and tugs Harry into his lap and cradles him like he's someone precious, quickly holding Harry's hands in his own to keep

his artist from hurting himself. “Harry,” he says rocking the younger boy, “it’s okay to be angry. I don’t know if anyone’s ever told you that before, but it’s okay to be sad and furious and struggling. I hate my mother for being a weak witch and dying like a common muggle whore. I hate that she left me at an orphanage and I hate my father for abandoning me when he was perfectly alive and had more than enough money to take me in. I hate my mother for drugging my father and having to spend my whole life knowing that no one alive has ever wanted me. Being upset because the universe is unfair doesn’t make you a bad person, Harry. I promise.”

Harry says, “Sirius wants you. I want you.” He shudders and then admits. “…I hate myself because I killed the person who you became.”

Tom breathes in deeply and closes his eyes. His voice shakes when he speaks, “And I hate myself, *so much,* for becoming the kind of person who could orphan anyone, least of all you.”

“We’re so fucked up, aren’t we, Tom?”

There’s a rumble of thunder in the distance. Sounds of rain filter softly to where Harry and Tom are huddled on the bed.

Tom places a hand under Harry’s chin and runs his thumb over Harry’s soft cheek. He pulls Harry close, flush against his body, and kisses him. Their bodies fit together. Harry is nestled in Tom’s lap, legs wrapped around Tom’s back. Harry kisses Tom like he’s drowning, like he’s holding on to Tom for dear life. Tom places one hand under Harry’s soft nightshirt and runs his palm over the soft expanse of skin, mapping every rib and feeling Harry’s heart beating.

The room is dark until a flash of lightning illuminates everything for a single second, and Tom sees the shadow of Harry’s eyelashes on his cheek. Then it’s dark again.

Resting his forehead against Harry's, hand still on his darling's bare back, he says, "No. We're figuring things out. That's not fucked up. That's all anyone can do."

"Yeah?" Harry asks.

"Yeah. We're gonna be okay, you and me."

Harry crooks his head into Tom's neck. "Okay?" he asks rhetorically, a hint of humor filtering through his somber tone. "Nah, we're gonna be incredible. They're gonna write stories about us one day. We're the love story of the century."

Tom's mind repeats Harry saying: *we're the love story.*

Part of his mind says, *It's not love.* A louder part yells, *It is. It is.*

Tom says, "I don't think love makes you weak anymore, Harry. I don't think attachment takes away reason and I think affection is necessary. You understood this whole time. People need people because life's not worth living all alone. We need to love people so we can love ourselves. It makes our lives worthwhile. If I had all the power and fame and money in the world and no one to share it with, I think I would be miserable and lonely. I was immortal and alone and it *was* lonely. I remember you told me once you hoped to be loved again someday."

Harry stares up at Tom with wide emerald eyes and puffy lips and he's *adorable* and *precious* and so unbearably *beautiful.* Tom's filled with a feeling of warmth spreading down his head to every nerve on his body.

“I remember that too,” Harry says softly as though he’s afraid if he speaks too loud he’ll somehow break this moment.

Tom cups the back of Harry’s head.

“You don’t have to wait anymore. I… I love you, Harry Potter. I love you.”

Harry smiles and it’s *dazzling.* It looks like the sun is shining through the storm. “ *Tom.* I love you too. Of course, I do.”

Tom grins and allows himself to relax back on the pillows. This time, Harry is lying with his head on Tom’s chest.

“Good, because you’re never getting rid of me. Not now.”

“We’re gonna make each other happy, aren’t we?”

“Incandescently happy. I’ll make you tea in the morning and pretend you’re not even remotely famous. So you need to stay safe in the third task, okay?”

Harry nods against Tom’s sternum. “You got it.”

They get under the covers and settle in for sleep. As Harry’s breathing evens out, Tom whispers, “I love you.”

Harry's voice comes out garbled and thick with sleep, "Love you too," he exhales and starts saying in a manner that is distinctly *not awake,* "...love chocolate and bananas but only when they're in bread and treacles and you, you very much, and also cinnamon in hot chocolate and –"

Tom snickers and shushes his half-dreaming rambling darling. "Shh. Go to sleep, my love."

Harry snuffles and presses close to Tom. Tom wraps his arms around Harry and allows the part of his mind that's been screaming for years that love is a weakness and that no one will ever care for him to recede into the darkness and get a little quieter.

Chapter End Notes

Missy Damier appears in chapters 11, 14? and maybe around 20 or somewhere. She's been coming up a bit every now and again but in case you forgot about her entirely, refer back to chapter 11 which is when she is talked about in the greatest detail.

If you have any fanart you want to be included, please send it to maytal.w.booth!@gmail.com

Next chapter: Harry learns something very interesting and goes to the third task

Thank you for reading. Please leave a kudos if you feel so inclined and a comment so I know I am not writing into the void ~

Monster

Chapter Summary

The one where things happen and then keep happening. AHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHHAHAHA

Chapter Notes

PSA: This chapter will contain references to child sexual predation (although it is entirely not happening) and explicit depictions of torture. Watch out and take care.

Thanks to all you lovely commenters and people who are reading this. University has been very hard and if anyone understands how to use ggplot in R to make a graph that shows the margin of votes across states, please let me know. I'm dying.

School stress aside, I find writing very rewarding so here's a chapter I made during midterm season. Hope y'all like it.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

And yet, it seems novelty is constant. Through the eyes of a child, the world is shockingly captivating. There's magic everywhere. Even here in this dark closet.

Tom Black: Vandalizer, Paedophile, Murderer

Rita Skeeter

We all held our breaths as the story of Sirius Black's innocence unfolded. That was a story of bravery, treachery, and untold grief. Sirius Black was falsely fettered for fighting a friend in the dead of the night after said friend, Peter Pettigrew, betrayed the Potters and murdered thirteen muggles.

Although Sirius Black is a shining beacon of hope and redemption in the darkness of his house lineage, it seems that Tom Black is taking after his grandparents, aunts, and uncle, all confirmed blood supremacists, servants of he-who-must-not-be-named, and/or practitioners of dark magic. The legacy of dubious morals finds a stronghold in the house's youngest member, Tom Black, son of Cassiopeia Black and an unknown father who may very well be, yes that's right, you-know-who himself.

Tom Black was witnessed outside of the women's lavatory on Hogwarts' first floor carving words into the door. Such vandalism is inexplicable and made all the more perverted due to the fact that Black engaged in such defacement of public property after exiting the women's lavatory. What had the seventeen year old school student been doing inside the lavatory? Girls as young as eleven may have been using the loo while Tom was inside the lavatory's confines. Indeed, Tom's vandalism is an ode to a girl named "Myrtle Warren," who was just fourteen at the time of her death and has regularly haunted Hogwarts as a ghost since. It seems that Harry Potter is not the first fourteen year old with whom Tom has been enamoured, and it is concerning that he has a preference for the deceased.

After Black left his vandalism on the outside of the women's lavatory, he made his way to the records room in Hogwarts. Heaven only knows what he was searching for, but it is this humble reporter's opinion that he was searching for information on his father. Despite being the heir to one of the most highly regarded and wealthy families in all the wizarding world, relatively little information exists on Tom Black outside of his mother, Cassiopeia Black. She was something of an enigma and was the perfect daughter of the house of Black until she disappeared. Tom was allegedly raised in the same neighbourhood as Harry Potter, but that city is of course unknown in order to protect the boy-who-lived from Death Eaters.

It is entirely plausible that Tom somehow is the child of Black and he-who-must-not-be-named. It explains the secrecy shrouding this violent and powerful young man. It is believed by some people that you-

know-who is a former Hogwarts student who cursed the position for Defence Against the Dark Arts after being denied the post. A Hogwarts professor who asked for his anonymity told me that Tom is the spitting image of the Dark Lord in his youth.

After finding something in the records room, possibly information about his father, Black ate dinner with Harry Potter, the fourteen year old child with whom he is in a relationship. Black was seen being incredibly controlling as he forced Harry to eat specific foods, and then he put on an invisibility cloak to follow the child up the Gryffindor dorm. Despite popular opinion, it seems Hufflepuffs can be quite nefarious. In keeping with some rumours about members of the house of Black, Tom Black evidently has quite the taste for underage girls and boys.

Vandalism and paedophilia aside, Black is a proven murderer. During the second task, Tom brutally decapitated a Merperson and possibly grievously injured Harry Potter. Dumbledore entered the waters of the black lake and only then did Black emerge carrying a Harry Potter who was impaled by a spear and in critical condition. If Dumbledore had not entered the waters, would Black have killed Harry in addition to the Merperson? Is he the one who impaled the boy-who-lived? Is his violence an attempt to carry on the legacy of the House of Black, or worse, the man who may be his father? Tom Black is a menace, a madman, and a murderer. This humble reporter will do her best to ensure justice is carried out for his crimes in the court of public opinion.

“What a load of unsubstantiated garbage,” Hermione complains.

Tom sits tall in the face of malevolent stares levelled in his direction. “Yes, well, it’s not as if print journalism has ever been anything but the dregs of society.”

“It’s weird, though. Like, Skeeter got a ton of details right she shouldn’t have known anything about,” Harry says.

“It’s like she spent the whole week stalking Tom,” Ron says.

Tom shrugs, “Wouldn’t be the first time I was stalked.”

“I’m sorry, what?” Hermione asks.

“I hate her,” Harry spits.

“That’s new from you,” Tom comments.

Harry stands, face flushed adorably and mouth set in a firm line. “Yeah, well, I’m protective of people I love.”

“Love? That’s new too,” Ron says.

Tom feels warmth tingling and a fierce desire to *protect, protect,* and realises that if Harry were ever to be hurt, Tom would tear the world apart.

“Novelty is constant,” Tom says. “It’s part of being alive.” And Tom feels alive. There are eyes looking at him like he’s something frightening and he is. He killed a merperson and he feels no regret. For Harry, he would kill a thousand times more. *Let them be afraid. Let them be frightened and hateful. Prey recognizes predators.* Tom is more

than happy to play the part of the monster.

***

Harry strides up to his studio during his free period, anger causing his fingers to curl in a tight fist. The whispers that follow Tom and this bad press feel so calculated and cruel for no reason at all. It's like the media is this vapid swirling thing that is so devoid of character it needs to drag people into nothingness simply to keep afloat.

He hates that at the drop of a hat people are so willing to change sides and detest someone. He knows that as soon as something comes out showing Tom was a hero, they will flip back. Regard is easily lost and easily won. It's an hourglass he and Tom share. As the golden sands slip through the glass sieve, public opinion ebbs and flows. Harry is tired of it. Harry is just tired.

As Harry walks to the studio, he hears footsteps. He turns to look behind him and doesn't see anyone. Still, he's certain that someone is around.

"Who's there?" He calls out.

The hallway is eerily silent. In fact, there's a void of sound to Harry's left. Whereas before he'd heard footsteps, he now hears nothing. He can't hear footsteps or even just the rustle of air as it drifts through the halls. Against one wall, there is utter silence.

Harry cocks his head. *Strange. It's like someone cast a silencing charm but no one is here.*

As he stares harder at the spot of silence, something begins to take form in his vision. He can't see a person per se, but he sees a mass of jagged mirrors surrounding a tiny beetle. As the image starts to take greater form, he gets the taste of ink on his tongue and a sense of thrumming adrenaline.

Can he see me? Of course, he can't. I'm wearing an invisibility cloak.

Faith so strong in her ability to go undetected sings out from her soul, but Rita Skeeter is anything but undetected now that Harry's caught sight of her.

In one swift motion, he lunges forward and drags the invisibility cloak off of the reporter. Her large eyes blink out from behind glasses and her mouth opens in shock.

Harry drops the cloak on the floor with a grimace. "Peeping on students is a crime, Skeeter. Who's the paedophile now?"

Rita goes an uncomfortable shade of red and quickly cancels the silencing charm she cast. "I am no such thing. I haven't –"

"Gone around a school full of underage children wearing an invisibility cloak? It looks like you have. Who knows where you've been and what you've seen."

Rita says, "I am a member of the press! I deserve access to this school. I am doing investigative journalism and acting for the general public as the voice of truth."

Harry lounges against the wall and takes a deep breath to calm

himself. “Are you? Because it seems like you’re just writing character assassinations and printing whatever garbage will sell. Weren’t you going to find out who put my name in the goblet? Maybe you should go back to doing something that might actually help people.”

“You put on a good face, but you’re actually quite selfish, aren’t you Mr. Potter? Doesn’t it seem important that people know your little boyfriend could be the son of the darkest wizard who ever lived? How can you live with yourself as you embrace the child of the man who murdered your parents?”

“That’s enough,” Harry commands. “I don’t understand the wizarding world’s obsession with parents and bloodlines but I am no more my father than Tom is his, and, no, I don’t think it matters in the slightest. It’s not like Voldemort” – Rita flinches, “would have been a present father. And ‘could be’ are the operative words. You have no idea how wrong you are. Shows how little you actually know, you just went and claimed that Tom’s muggle father is the Dark Lord.”

Rita’s eyes narrow. “Are you telling me that Tom’s father is a muggle?”

Harry coughs as though he’s been caught off guard. “Er…no. I didn’t say that. Weird thing to think.”

Rita’s eyes narrow further until it feels like she has two slits in her face. “You’re lying. Tom’s father *is* a muggle, isn't he? Or maybe, wasn't he?”

“I truly did not say that.”

Rita’s barely listening. “Explains why Cassoiepia had to disappear and was blasted off the tapestry. A pureblood princess running off with a

muggle? Of course. Of course. Still…I could have sworn that Tom was somehow related…" Rita trails off clearly lost in her thoughts.

"If I catch you wearing the invisibility cloak again I will report you to the authorities," Harry says. "And I will catch you if you do this again."

Rita shrugs and gives Harry a mean sort of smile. "Oh don't worry dear, I have more than enough to write my next story."

As she walks away, Harry is struck by the thought he's never seen such a fractured soul before. Her jagged mirrors reflect nothingness and emptiness and he wonders how easy it is to be so fundamentally broken on the inside. Vapidness aside, he's certain the Daily Prophet's next issue will make it clear that Tom Black is not the son of Voldemort. It's big news that the heir of house Black is - gasp - a halfblood. After its published, Tom will be able to walk around without people staring at him like he's a murderer, or worse, someone who should be dead.

And if, in the meantime, Draco Malfoy tells Harry to stay away from Tom, well, that's to be expected and just shows that Draco cares.

("Potter! Potter!"

"What, Draco?"

"You need to break up with Tom and run. Maybe come stay with my family this summer. Mother and Father will take you, I asked."

"Why?"

“That stuff Skeeter wrote? About him being the son of the Dark Lord? It’s true!”

“Wut?”

“You may not know but my grandfather was a follower of the Dark Lord. Imperiused for two generations, our family was. Likely because we are so powerful and wealthy… the Dark Lord could never risk us being able to think for ourselves. At any rate, my father has a photo of what the Dark Lord looked like back in his Hogwarts days because he spent a few summers with Grandfather Abraxus. He asked me for a photo of Tom and I sent it to my father and he sent me one of the young Dark Lord and the two of them look almost identical. Forget son, without glasses Tom looks like he could be the Dark Lord’s *twin* . You need to run away before he kills you.”

“I’ll be okay, Draco. Tom would never hurt me.”

“What you are is stupid, Harry. Dumber than a flobberworm. Tom. Wants. You. Dead. I always knew there was something creepy about that fucker.”

“Look, I get that you’re trying to help me but I really think if Tom wanted me dead he’d have killed me already. I’m fine.”

“You are very much not fine. You are so far from fine that I might classify you as poor. Fix yourself and see reason.”

“Alright, it’s been real but I’m gonna go paint now. Thanks for looking out for me.”

“Potter! Potter! HARRY!”)

Harry had chosen to walk away and the castle decided to make it difficult for Draco to follow him. Draco sent Harry six letters in two hours describing in gory detail all the ways Tom might choose to kill him and all the reasons Tom hadn’t killed him yet, and Harry’s saving all the letters because he has plans.

Maybe if he and Tom get married he can give the letters back to Draco. You know, for Draco to put in his wedding speech about why Harry and Tom in a union is a *bad idea because he will murder you after marriage so he can steal all your money.*

That was in letter three.

***

The day of the third task dawns cold and grey. Harry curls himself in his crimson sheets and wishes desperately that he was already finished with the tournament. He’s an odd mix of tired and overwhelmed. He feels like he shouldn’t have the energy to be as stressed as he is and yet it feels like all the energy he has goes toward being anxious.

Ron drags him out of bed. “Breakfast is not optional.”

“What if I opted to eat it later?”

Ron glares at Harry. “Then it would be lunch. And as I said, ‘Breakfast

is not optional.'"

Harry sighs. "Right."

Tom accompanies Harry to the quidditch pitch as far as he can go. Whispers follow him and Harry but neither of them acknowledge the screams of "murderer," and "Harry get away from him!"

"You alright?" he asks Tom under his breath.

"I will be. Promise me you won't try to navigate the maze."

Harry says, "I promise."

Tom catches Harry's face between his hands and leans down to kiss him desperately. He pushes so hard there's a clash of teeth and it's *too much* but then their mouths slot into place and the noise of the crowd – the dismayed cries and jeers and insults – fade into nothingness.

Nothing matters except Harry and Tom.

And then Harry pulls away. "I promise. I'll be safe."

Tom says, "That's all I ask."

Harry salutes.

***

When Harry enters the maze, he sits down and taps his fingers against his thigh. He's gone barely ten metres into the hedge maze. He raises his head to the sky and wonders if the clouds will gain the courage to rain.

He settles himself more comfortably on the ground and hopes no creatures are wandering around this close to the entrance of the maze. His heart sinks when he hears the crunch of boots. He stands, dusting his clothes off, and grasps his wand.

He settles down when he sees Krum walking toward him carrying a lock in his hands.

"Krum?" He says.

"Potter," Krum greets evenly. He seems bizarrely calm. "I need your help with something. I found this in the maze and can't figure it out." He shows Harry the lock.

If Harry were trying to win the tournament, he'd refuse to help the quidditch player, but Krum is dating Hermione and he really couldn't care less about winning.

He walks toward Krum. "Sure."

Something seems strange, though. Krum barely reacts to Harry and his eyes are glazed over.

“You alright?” Harry asks.

“Could you just hold this?” Krum asks, lifting the lock up in the air. It’s pewter and plain looking. Krum’s wearing gloves.

“Um,” Harry says. The feeling that something is wrong intensifies. “Well…” he gets the sense he really shouldn’t touch the lock. Something is definitely going very strange with Krum.

Harry is about to take a quick peek into Krum’s soul to see what’s going on when the Bulgarian steps forward and presses the lock against Harry’s hand.

Harry cries out but the sounds are lost to the void as he feels a pull in his navel. Krum just handed Harry a portkey and now Harry is hurtling far from safety.

Harry lands with a great thud on wet grass that clings to his robes. The wetness permeates everything. He takes deep rattling breaths of damp air and feels as though he is drowning. The sky overhead obscures the sun and mists roll and drift just above the ground, curling and dancing like ghosts.

He surveys his surroundings as quickly as possible and notices three things at once. He is in a graveyard. There’s a cauldron. He is not alone.

There’s a flash of red and then Harry’s wand flies out of his hand. Harry stares shocked at Peter Pettigrew. He’s studied the image of the man who betrayed his parents, masqueraded as Ron’s pet, and escaped Azkaban.

“Good. Now, restrain the boy. Against my father’s grave,” commands a high voice. Harry feels himself recoil as he stares at a mangled body near the cauldron. What he had at first thought were rags, he now recognizes as an odd bundle of black cloth surrounding a grotesque childlike figure. Voldemort has a pale face, protruding bones, and the odd shape of an infant. He looks monstrous.

“Yes, master,” says the rat.

“Can I respectfully request that you don’t restrain me?” Harry asks.

Pettigrew ignores him and wastes little time casting a spell that binds Harry to the grave of someone named “Tom Riddle.”

“Gee,” Harry says, “Your parents had no creativity when it came to naming. Tom Riddle Senior and Tom Riddle Junior. If you had a son, would you name him Tom too? Or would you call him Voldemort?”

“ *Such insolence,”* Voldemort says in his odd sibilant voice. *“The boy attempts to use humour to hide his horror. And yet… I can taste his fright. He will splinter into nothingness so beautifully, won’t he, Pettigrew?”*

“Ah, yes, Master,” Pettigrew says. He looks awful and ashen.

“Collect some of the boy’s blood.”

Pettigrew flinches. “Ah! Right. Yes,” and he pulls a knife from his cloak. Harry strains against the ropes until he feels a burning against his skin. His skin chafes and he can feel the rope marks etching their way deeper and deeper into his wrists until he bears the mark of his bondage. He wonders if his wrists or the ropes will break first and

continues to pull his arms, limbs shaking with exertion and sweat beading on his brow.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," Pettigrew says, almost apologetically. "It'll just make this hurt worse."

Harry trains his eyes on the knife, dirty with mud and sharp with a curved blade. "Please, don't do whatever you're about to do, we can help you and –"

"Who is 'we?'" Pettigrew laughs hysterically and avoids making any kind of eye-contact with Harry. "I'm beyond help now and soon you will be too."

"Pettigrew. Stop stalling. I can tolerate the boy begging but I am tired of your voice."

Pettigrew nods and brings the knife down toward Harry. He wavers as though he is reluctant, but he bites his lip and squares his shoulders. Harry's eyes focus on the blade until it is all he can see. He watches the rusted metal glint in the moonlight as the knife descends ever closer to his skin. He doesn't know how deep he will be cut. There are places in his arms with nerves and if one of those is cut, he may never be able to wield a wand or paintbrush again. Harry breathes out. He thinks, " *If I survive this… if I survive and I lose my ability to paint…I'll learn how to paint with my other hand. And if I lose both hands I'll learn how to paint with my feet. This will not end me. I won't let it."* Harry tries his best to calm down his beating heart but he hears a ringing in his ears and he can barely catch his breath.

Harry feels pain as the knife sinks into his skin – it's hot and sudden – but he stares transfixed at his blood as it wells up in little beads and drips scarlet into the waiting vial Peter produces.

Harry can't help wondering what art he could craft with a blood quill. His blood is so *red* and so *vibrant.* If he used it as paint it would create something *beautiful.*

He's reminded of Trelawney's vision of a possible future and her saying that soul seers often, when forced to use their abilities, "go looking for blood quills." In this moment, he understands viscerally the seduction toward painting with his own life rather than relying on pigment.

Once Pettigrew has collected a vial full, he pulls away. Harry clenches his fingers and is relieved to learn that he has retained a full range of motion in his arms and hands. The red continues to drip down Harry's arm sluggishly. Thin rivulets curl and flow over his knuckles, staining his nail beds crimson as though his hand is baptised with blood.

Harry gets a kind of grim satisfaction when Voldemort demands Pettigrew's arm but it is outweighed by the growing horror he feels as the ritual reaches completion.

He knows that "Bone of the father. Flesh of the servant. Blood an enemy, forcibly taken" are words that he will never forget as long as he lives.

When the potion is completed, Pettigrew stands sobbing heavily and trying to hold his stump as though he is unperturbed.

There is a moment where everything is almost calm and Harry prays to gods who have never answered him before that this is where the nightmare ends.

But then, through the rolling curtains of mist, Harry sees the dark outline of a figure unfurling from the cauldron. It's as if elongated shadows from underneath the beds of frightened children congregated to form a tall and skeletal monster.

"Robe me," intones the high and cold voice.

Wormtail whimpers, and cradling his mutilated arm, scrambles to pick up the black tattered robes at his feet. He pulls them over his master's head with one hand, and Harry can't help but notice the bits of dirt and grass that cling to the dark fabric.

Gaunt and corporeal, Voldemort steps out of the cauldron with a kind of serpentine grace. His skin is pale, bordering on marble. His eyes are a livid, glowing scarlet, and his nose is flat as a snake with nothing but slits for nostrils.

He makes eye contact with Harry and smiles mean and slow. "Harry Potter. How fitting that just as you are attributed with my downfall, so too shall you be the reason for my return."

"I can just be the cause of downfall 2.0," Harry says with a bravado he absolutely does not feel.

If anything, Voldemort seems entirely unconcerned. "Children say all sorts of things when they are afraid. Lord Voldemort is not forgiving, but I will not begrudge your final words. You are, however, rather foolish. Do you really want to spend your final breaths antagonising me?"

Harry trains his eyes on his holly wand which is out of reach and by one of the other stones in the graveyard. "There are worse ways to go than antagonising someone evil."

Voldemort laughs as though he is legitimately amused. “Child, there is no true evil. There is no redemption either. At our core, we are all born from nothingness and fighting desperately to never return to that void from which we come. All that matters is power. You can dress up your choices as pretty as you like but in the end, the only person you fool is yourself.”

Harry thinks back to Tom from a few years ago and feels his heart *ache.* Voldemort could have been so different if he’d ever been pushed to change. Harry tries to look into Voldemort’s soul and recoils immediately.

He feels bile rise in his throat and twists to avoid vomiting all over himself. If Rita’s soul is fractured… Voldemort’s soul is butchered and disfigured. It’s a mass of roiling and rotten flowers and maggots and entrails… it’s missing and hacked up and disgusting. It’s barely a soul at all.

“Does the truth frighten you, Harry? You cannot lie to me.” Voldemort purrs.

“Yes, it does,” Harry says. The truth of Voldemort’s soul is horrifying.

Voldemort licks his lips. “How…satisfying,” he says and trains his eyes on Wormtail. “Pettigrew, give me your arm. The one you still have, if you would.”

Wormtail tries to quiet his moans and raises a tear-soaked face. “My other arm, my lord?”

“The one with your mark. Do not doubt me. I will reward your loyalty.”

“Yes, My Lord,” Pettigrew responds hallowly, holding out his unharmed arm. Voldemort presses his wand to the tattoo of a skull and a snake and Harry feels dark and cloying magic permeate the air.

Men, high profile and well-dressed men, appear in this damp graveyard. Their finery and coiffed hair contrast so drastically from the muddy grass and black-robed monster. Harry shrinks against the stone and feels shame creep into his being.

He is suddenly aware of how he must look. His arm is cut, he is tied to a headstone, his robes are tattered, and he’s a small fourteen year old boy. He hardly looks at the picture of the hero who brought about the end of their lord.

Harry makes eye contact with a horrified Lucius Malfoy who appears to be clenching his jaw in the hopes to appear something other than alarmed. Harry knows this man does not love him but he’s wearing the Malfoy family Mind Guardians and Draco just said that Lucius and Narcissa agreed to house him over the summer. That must mean, that on some level, maybe Lucius cares for him. Harry doesn’t want to die.

“Save me,” he whispers, “please. Help me.”

Lucius looks away until all Harry can see is the profile of an aristocratic nose and a curtain of blonde hair.

Harry sags in his bindings.

Voldemort says, “No one will save you.” He looks at the assembled Death Eaters. “Where is Karkaroff?”

“Not here, My Lord,” someone says.

“Evidently. It makes me wonder… How loyal are each of you? I had to rely on Wormtail to regain a corporeal body. Did you abandon your oaths of fealty as soon as you heard I was gone?” Displeasure ripples off Voldemort in palpable waves.

One Death Eater hastens to say, “No, of course not, My Lord. I hadn’t dared to hope you would return, but if I’d known –”

Voldemort flicks his wand with a muttered, "crucio," and the man who had been speaking sinks to his knees, back arching as he screams.

“Do not lie to me, Avery. You moved on and became fat and lazy with wealth. You hoped I would never return. It matters not, you came here and I can find a use for you still. Perhaps you can become entertainment at meetings until you prove useful in other ways.”

Voldemort lifts the curse and Avery shakes on the grass.

“Be grateful for my mercy.”

“Thank you, My Lord,” Avery manages.

Voldemort says, “Oh, you’ll have to show me a bit more gratitude than that. First, however, we must address the child tied to a gravestone.” Voldemort motions to where Harry is bound. “You know of course, that there are those who call this boy my downfall? I am sure you’ve heard the story that on the night I lost my powers and

body, I tried to kill him. His mother died in an attempt to save him – and left him with a protection I admit I had not foreseen. For a time, I could not touch the boy. The mother left upon him traces of sacrifice, and old and deep magic. It was foolish to overlook such things, but it is of no matter. I can touch him now."

Harry shivers and yet, he recalls his first Patronus. He recalls his mother's eyes filling with tears of joy. *You're alive. You lived. It was worth everything.*

"She didn't die *attempting* to save my life. Whatever happens tonight, I lived for thirteen years after you attacked us. My mother succeeded."

Voldemort tsks. "I do not think we shall call her *attempt* a success. I did not know your mother, and yet, I imagine she hoped you would live to adulthood. A hope I promise will never come to fruition, although I do suppose you enjoyed the beginnings of childhood as a result of my oversight. You are welcome, Harry, for that. Now, I believe it is time for you to learn of pain the way I have learned of pain. Crucio."

Harry has never felt pain like this. *Pain* does not even begin to describe what he feels. He can barely breathe. He feels simultaneously as if he is being pressed to death and there are a thousand beetles crawling beneath his skin, buried in his veins, and attempting to claw their way out. The pain is everywhere – it's in his eyes, his mouth, his arms, his toes, his lungs. He thrashes hoping to get some physical input anywhere other than this… any pain is better than this one.

When it lifts, Harry can't help but feel grateful. In a distorted way, the reprieve from pain is enough for him to almost see Voldemort in a better light. It's a vicious cycle. He would do anything to never feel that pain again and he can see the temptation to fall to his knees and kiss the hem of Voldemort's robes to thank him for his mercy. Harry has not felt pity before, but he pities every Death Eater.

Death is better than serving this monster.

Harry realises that he is no longer bound to the headstone and that he has fallen sideways into his vomit. He grimaces against the smell.

“I will give you an honourable end, child. Duel me.”

Harry crawls toward his wand, scarcely believing his luck. He clasps it quickly and scrambles to his feet. Voldemort is watching him, almost patiently.

Harry remembers hundreds of lessons with Sirius and Tom, learning new magic until he was shivering from exertion.

Sirius has taught Harry how to run and that everything is legal when you are fighting for your life. Harry tries to think of where he can go. Hogwarts has anti-apparition wards. He can’t remember any Hogsmeade shop easily and he needs somewhere he can recall in perfect detail. Somewhere that even when is stressed he will never forget.

Harry hears as though from a great distance, “imperio. Bow to death, Harry.”

Harry does not bow. He stands to his full height and sees in front of his eyes a locked door, a flickering lightbulb, and a sign saying, “Harry’s Room.”

The people around him are muttering as Harry Potter remains impervious to their lord’s Imperio. Voldemort snarls and begins the

incantation for Avada Kedavra.

With a deafening crack, Harry Potter disappears from the graveyard and a flash of green light clatters uselessly against the gravestone of a muggle named Tom Riddle.

***

Harry apparates. He lands on his hands and knees in the cupboard of Number Four Privet Drive.

Except, there's no cupboard anymore. Harry is simply beneath some open shelving, bleeding onto the floor.

He hears quick footsteps and raises his eyes to watch his aunt running toward him from the kitchen.

"Harry! Is that you –? Oh my days, Harry -"

Harry closes his eyes and sways. He falls forward. Thin arms catch him and he relaxes at long last. He's safe. He survived.

"Aunt Petunia, I'm home."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: learn who the fudge Missy Damier is and watch Dumbledore get slapped. Yes. He will be slapped.

Oh and who figured out the footsteps were Rita Skeeter? A quick reminder she can't animgnus about because of the newly updated wards that were added after Pettigrew escaped Azkaban.

Please leave a comment or a kudos if you feel so inclined and so that I know I am not writing into the void. You know, because I am trying desperately not to return there, just like good old Voldieshorts said.

Sunset

Chapter Notes

Hello hello! I am back from the great beyond with a Goliath of a chapter. Wooohooo.

This chapter has a bunch of pieces and it may seem discordant so there's that. I got to a point where I decided I just needed to get words out and this is what happened. Still, writing this story has been the journey of a lifetime and I am so excited to share another chapter with all of you.

May you all stay happy and safe

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sky is a brilliant azure. The sun is molten gold. Life blooms even in the ugliest of places. Warmth permeates even the coldest spaces.

Draco knows what fear feels like. When he was a child locked outside overnight in the freezing cold, he'd been afraid. When Draco looked at pictures of his crazy Aunt Bellatrix, he felt fear. This, however, is terror. Draco's heart beats a discordant too-fast rhythm and he cannot catch his breath. He feels goosebumps rise on his skin and sweat drips down the back of his neck.

Diggory won the tournament, smiling brilliantly and holding a golden goblet. Delacour and Krum made their way out of the maze. Harry never resurfaced.

The maze was burned down and there was still no sign of Harry. There was shouting, a prophecy, and then… Tom Black stood tall like some kind of demon, eyes glowing red and wearing snakes like a cloak.

Draco shudders as he sits watching the chaos unfold. In his stomach, there's a heavy feeling. War is rising on the horizon.

***

Tom waits for Harry to come out of the maze after Diggory wins. First Fleur reappears, then Viktor, but Harry is nowhere to be found.

“Where’s Harry?” Hermione asks, softly.

Tom yells, “I’m razing the maze.”

“You’re doing what?” Ron shouts above the confused hubbub of those watching the tournament.

Tom doesn’t answer, just mutters under his breath and golden light shoots out from his wand. It flashes to the hedges and sets them alight. In a matter of moments, the maze is gone revealing ashy ground and an otherwise empty pitch.

“He’s not on the pitch,” Hermione says, “Where is he? Oh my god, where’s Harry?”

Tom clenches his fists and rises. “I have a bit of his blood left and plenty of hair, I can find him.”

Ron spits out some butterbeer, “You have what?”

Hermione says, shrilly, “Now is not the time to deal with how creepy Tom is, Ronald!”

From next to where all teachers sit, Trelawney shakily stands to her

feet. Her eyes glaze over and burn silver. When she speaks, her voice rings out unnaturally loud and layered.

“ Child of magic and bone

Child of ink and of soul

Child born beloved twice

The unpayable Dark Lord’s price

Uncover darkness free and bound

The screeching silence and silent sound

Hear the echoes of magic lost

Protect your beloved, no matter the cost”

When Trelawney finishes speaking there are shouts of “another prophecy!” and the professor collapses against her seat, evidently drained.

“Child of ink and of soul,” Tom whispers. *No matter the cost* echoes off every thought in his head. He’s been holding back all of his destructive energy since he was reborn (born beloved twice). He’s certain he is the subject of this prophecy. He is the child of magic and bone, and he will destroy the world until Harry is back safe in his arms.

He is the last Gaunt with a soul, he is the heir of Slytherin. His voice rings out, parseltongue spilling from his lips, “ *Serpents and snakes, come to me.”*

Wind ripples around Tom’s frame and whistles through the trees of the Forbidden Forest. There’s a distant rumbling. There’s the sound of scales rubbing against the ground and hordes of snakes, some small

and some large, winding toward Tom. People in the stands scream. Tom stands tall and opens his arms as the snakes slide and curl around him, hissing and vying for the chance to be useful.

Tom looks out, covered in a roiling mass of snakes, eyes burning red. Dumbledore looks resigned and Snape looks shocked. Moody, though, looks at Tom almost hungrily. The man's flask hangs at his belt. Something about that flask concerns Tom and makes him feel on edge.

"Bring me the container on the man with a glass eye," Tom commands. A dozen snakes speed off toward Moody.

When they slip up to grab the flask, Moody reacts defensively, cutting the snakes with blasts of magic. The smell of rotting flesh fills the air.

Tom takes the moment Moody is distracted to summon the flask to his hand and calls off the snakes. Moody turns to stare at Tom in horror as Tom raises the flask in a toast.

"Constant vigilance, eh?" Tom says, and yanks Ron back by his hair. He tips the flask back into Ron's throat and the Gryffindor gurgles once in surprise but swallows reflexively.

Tom's not sure what he's hoping for – but something about Moody's feverish excitement in the face of Harry's disappearance puts him on edge. Tom stares as Ron lengthens and bulges out. A wooden leg pops out, a glass eye situates itself in his head.

"Polyjuice potion!" Hermione whisper-shouts.

Ron-Moody grunts and looks down at himself. “Wicked,” he murmurs, “I mean it’s a bad look that whoever the fuck was teaching us is an imposter, very bad yes, but just wait until Charlie learns I got to have a body like his all-time favorite war hero for an hour.”

Hermione shouts, “Ron!”

“Right, yeah, not the time. Got it. Also, can we talk later about how Harry’s boyfriend literally made me ingest an unknown liquid?”

Hermione groans as Tom ducks underneath a flash of red sent by fake-not-Ron-Moody, “Yes, Ron, we can do that *later.”*

Tom shoots out a stunner, an immobilizer, and a silencing spell toward the false professor in quick succession. Fake Moody deflects the stunner but it is unprepared for the immobilizer and the silencing spell, both of which hit him square in the chest. “I couldn’t very well make Hermione ingest it, now could I?” Tom asks, binding fake-Moody in several chains and trussing him like a Thanksgiving turkey.

“And why’s that?” Ron asks.

“Hermione is my friend,” Tom says, seriously. He’s learned all about friends in Hufflepuff. “You can’t do things like that to friends.” Of this, he is certain.

Hermione lets out a soft cooing, "Aww, that is so sweet. You're my friend too."

Ron-Moody glowers and it looks most impressive in his auror body.

“Am I not your friend, Tom?!”

“No,” Tom says, distractedly. He hears Fudge and Dumbledore each barking orders to aurors and teachers, handing out instructions like candy.

Tom needs to know if fake Moody has information on where Harry is, who took him, and how long it will take to retrieve his artist.

Tom vaults over the seats in the stands and runs toward fake-Moody, snakes slithering behind him.

Tom cancels the silencing spell on the man as soon as he is close enough to hear whatever would be said and demands, “Tell me where Harry is.”

The man coughs weakly and states, “Gone, gone. It’s too late for him now.”

Tom shakes the imposter roughly and he rattles in his bindings, “What do you mean? Where is he?”

Fake-Moody merely grins, a feral expression on the auror’s face. Fudge and Dumbledore are still shouting at one another, only half aware of the seventh-year student interrogating the imposter.

Fake-Moody’s form begins to bubble and condense, glass eyes giving way to a living one, wooden leg replaced by a skinny limb. Tom does not recognize the man in front of him, but it’s clear that several people do, because one person shouts, “I thought Bartemius Crouch Junior died in Azkaban!”

“I will take my final breaths at the side of my master and not a second sooner,” Fake-Moody Crouch? Mutters. “He is alive again, alive, alive, alive.” Fake-Moody licks his lips and trains his eyes on Tom's snakes. "My master will take you, Mr. Black, with open arms. An heir...you could be his heir..."

Fudge finally takes notice of the man in chains and does a double-take when he sees who is bound. He’s calling for dementors and a kiss despite the vehement protests of Dumbledore.

Tom is entering the man’s mind and getting glimpses, albeit fractured ones, of the monstrosity left in the world Above and clues for where Harry is, when he feels ice exhaled behind him. Tom turns, slowly, and is faced with a hooded figure and the sound of rattling breaths.

“Kiss the one in chains!” Fudge is ordering imperiously. The dementor reaches a skeletal hand underneath Tom’s chin. “The one in chains!” Fudge orders again, “Not the student.”

Your soul is tantalizing, the dementor seems to say. *So full and yet so young.*

Frost is spreading by Tom’s feet. “ *It’s so cold,”* the snakes complain.

Tom closes his eyes. He imagines Harry’s dazzling smile and the words, “I love you too.”

“EXPECTO PATRONUM,” Tom shouts. From his wand, a dazzling silver bird erupts, joining a silver phoenix in flight.

“ENOUGH!” Dumbledore thunders. “I will not have dementors on my campus, attacking my students. Indeed, I have a student missing, Fudge, and the man you are trying to have kissed may be the only person privy to the knowledge of who took Harry Potter. Control yourself, minister. There are eyes watching you.”

Dumbledore walks down to join Tom and stares for a moment in genuine shock at the phoenix Patronus nuzzling Tom’s Patronus. “A Bowerbird,” Dumbledore muses softly. His eyes glitter with something like hope and pride. “One of the only birds in nature to make art.”

"What else could it be?" Tom says, "It matters little."

"On the contrary, I would say it matters a geat deal."

“Not when Harry is missing. Not when this imposter said his master is back tonight,” Tom retorts.

Dumbledore's eyes harden and he pulls back the sleeve on the left side of Crouch’s bound arms. A skull and a snake tattoo twist angrily, the ink a vivid black.

“Tell me, Tom,” Dumbledore says, eyes grave and mouth pressed in a thin line, “You wouldn’t happen to have any of Harry’s blood handy, would you?”

Ron-Moody, who has crept over throughout the whole debacle with the subtlety of an elephant says, “He does! Creepy motherfucker has some of Harry’s hair as well.”

“Good,” Dumbledore says. “I can find him, then. Severus, take care of the prisoner, will you?”

The potions professor looks like he is in pain and briefly clutches his arm, but he nods, tersely. “As you so desire.”

Dumbledore pauses for a moment and then calls out, “Minerva, help Severus.”

Fudge protests, “This is a job for the ministry,” but Dumbledore ignores him and leads Tom out of the stands and into his office to begin the search for Harry Potter.

***

When Harry wakes up, it’s dark outside the small window in his old bedroom at Privet drive. He looks around, blinking hard, and then feels around on a side-table for his glasses. He remembers that he doesn’t wear glasses anymore and his arms fall limp to his side.

He swings his legs over the side of the bed and stands, wobbling slightly. He sees crimson eyes and feels phantom pain all over his body and swallows down bile.

“Bloody hell,” he whispers. His knees collapse and he falls back on his bed. He curls up, feeling dizzy and sick. He remains that way for a long time, hoping that with time he’ll feel better and stronger. Perhaps a few minutes pass and perhaps much longer, but he still feels like he’s only barely alive. Groaning, he props himself up despite the dots swimming in front of his vision, and shuffles the short way to the door. He learns his head against the cool wood for a few moments as the room spins around him. He notices in a vague way that all the locks and the cat flap are gone.

He opens the door and blinks again at the sudden light in the hall. He walks with short, halting steps, keeping one hand on the wall. He

makes his way down the stairs slowly and pauses again at the bottom before attempting to make his way into the kitchen.

It's early morning and maybe it's too early, but he remembers that Petunia always woke early and pretended she didn't like watching the sunrise even though she so clearly did.

As he enters the kitchen, he sees Aunt Petunia leaning against a counter, face long and drawn, pink bathrobe around her thin frame, eyes open and shocked.

"Harry," she greets, trembling. She must fly then, for not a second later, Harry feels Petunia's boney arms press against his back and brings up his own arms to clasp around hers. She smells like she did in his childhood, like roses and lemon soap and a tiny bit of some french perfume that's scented like an alcoholic blackberry. One of her hands smooths down the knobs of his spine and she presses a kiss to his temple and Harry can't help but melt into the embrace. This is all he'd ever wanted when he was kept in the cupboard. All those days he'd spent scrubbing the floors and making breakfasts…he'd done it all hoping he'd finally do enough so Petunia would hold him like she's holding him now, so she'd care for him the way she did Dudley.

She's taller than him because she never fed him enough, but he can tell she's guilty and happy in some weird way and she says, honest as anything, "I'm so glad you're alive."

Harry flinches. He recalls the vivid memory of the graveyard and the mangled mess of Voldemort's soul. He feels phantom pain lance through him and shudders.

He says, broken, "I don't know if I am."

She looks at his greener than jade eyes, a reminder of the sister she never stopped loving, and says, firmly, “I’ll just have to be glad enough for the both of us, then.”

She pulls him inside the kitchen and it’s different than he remembers. Gone are the sterile white and blue tones. It’s all red and gold now, but muggle gold is really just yellow, and it feels like a mix of Hufflepuff and Gryffindor. It feels like Tom and him.

Aunt Petunia guides him onto a chair and begins fixing him tea.

Harry sees that there’s a picture of him on the mantel now, seven and in oversized clothes. It must be a former school picture and he can’t believe that he’s there, on the *mantel*.

“You’ve redecorated.” He remarks.

Petunia sniffs. “Lily always says these were her colors. I never asked you -- but I just assumed you’d be in the same house, Gryffindor, she said-- but if you’d like, well, green’s not so bad is it? And blue -- I like blue --”

Harry cuts her off with a gentle, “it’s my house too. Gryffindor, I mean.”

The tea is ready and she sits down, prim and proper as ever, her eyes red as rubies around the edges.

“That’s good,” she decides, “because I think it would have been my house too if I’d been able to go.”

“Bravery?” Harry says, “That’s how you’d define yourself?” There’s no judgment in his words, only curiosity,

Aunt Petunia nods. “It’s not who I’ve been, but it’s how I’d like to be. I’m learning.” Harry notices that there’s no ring on her hand, and begins to wonder a lot about the changes he’s seeing.

“Where’s Vernon?” He asks quietly.

Aunt Petunia sniffs. “We split.”

Harry shakes his head, trying to understand. “Oh right. You told me at Christmas.” He pauses and then asks, “Why?”

Aunt Petunia looks so impossibly old and anguished for a moment, he regrets asking. This must have been a bad divorce, and he’s just gone and rubbed salt in her wound and --

“Because I loved you and was ashamed of myself and he wouldn’t let me be either.”

Harry stares at her blankly.

She takes a sip of her tea and sets it down. "Grief is like an insatiable beast. It consumes until it feels like there is nothing left. When I lost your mother, I was grieving and I lost myself. For that, I am sorry. I was angry the magical world didn't want me, and I am still angry that it took her from me. I ought to have said this years ago and it is far too little too late, but I do love you, Harry. Even if you hate me as you

should, I still care about you."

Harry stares at her. He takes his own sip of tea. Then he says, “You know I don’t hate you, right?”

Petunia clenches her fingers around the teacup. “Well, you’ve missed the whole point of that. Entirely too much like Lily, you are.” And her eyes are sad, but her tone is light.

When she begins to fix toast, there’s a loud knock on the door.

Petunia gets up and Harry follows her across the new red and golden living room. He stares at the lack of cupboard under the stairs and blinks slowly. He feels off-kilter. This is all he’d ever wanted. But wanting and having feel so different, he’s not sure what to do with himself.

Petunia opens the door on a benevolently smiling Albus Dumbledore. She snarls at him but he calmly walks into Number 4 Privet Drive and closes the door behind him.

“Harry, I am so glad to see you are well.”

Petunia moves to stand between Harry and Dumbledore. “He is not well.”

“Thank you for not turning him out. I’ll be happy to take him back to Hogwarts now.”

“Why?” Petunia asks, “So you can let him die?”

Dumbledore rears back, “My dear girl, what on earth are you talking about?”

Petunia raises her hand and slaps Dumbledore full across the face. A satisfying thwack rings out. “Don’t you dare call me that,” she says, voice shaking with intensity, “You murderer.”

“I am no such thing, Petunia.”

“Aren’t you? You are the kind of person who looks at a child who dies and thinks it is justified. You call it a tragedy that Lily is dead, but you’d let her die again a thousand times for what her death caused, wouldn’t you?”

Dumbledore does not deny it, and Harry feels the truth of what Petunia is saying in her bones. “What happened to the Potters was horrifying, and if I could have saved them from it, I would have.”

“Liar,” Petunia spits, “You would let Harry lose his parents a thousand times over if it brought about the end of your ‘Dark Lord.’ You have no business teaching children.”

“The Potters were adults when they made their choices. Surely you do not begrudge your sister fighting for freedom? I understand grief, I do, but perhaps you might benefit from celebrating your sister’s sacrifice.”

Harry’s mouth has a bitter taste when he recalls Dumbledore saying the blood wards of this house holding due to his mother’s sacrifice.

“SHE WAS A CHILD! A child that YOU groomed for walking to her own pyre, head held high. There is nothing to celebrate and there was nothing beautiful in her death!”

“She was no child.”

“She was twenty-one when she was murdered. I am more than twice her age now, and I promise you, a twenty-one-year-old-girl is very much a child. Where did the adults go in your war? Did they die before they became adults? Or do adults learn that magic isn’t worth it when your life's on the line? Is that why you are obsessed with turning Harry into a soldier? Children are, after all, much easier to control.”

Dumbledore fights to keep his expression tranquil. Harry can tell beneath the stoic surface, Dumbledore is boiling with anger. Petunia is hiding nothing and wearing her grief proudly.

“War robs all of us of our childhoods,” Dumbledore says at last. “Harry, it is time we return to school.”

Petunia clasps Harry’s shirt in her hands. “You don’t have to go,” she says, “Don’t go anywhere with him, Harry. Don’t trust him.”

Harry lets himself be drawn into another hug and surprises himself when he says, “I don’t. I still have to go back though.”

Petunia says, “You don’t have to do anything, Harry. Magic is beautiful, but when children are taken to fairyland they don’t come back.”

Harry pulls back and smiles at his aunt. “Then I promise, I’ll return from fairyland. I won't be taken.”

Petunia stares at Harry and Dumbledore with obvious fear before Dumbledore whisks Harry away.

When Harry is back at the Hogwarts gates with Dumbledore, the headmaster asks, “Is Voldemort back, then?”

Harry stares up at the castle that was his first home and marvels at how much smaller it feels now that he knows his aunt loves him. The sunshine is obscured by thick clouds and mist drifts on currents of air. Still, Harry felt warm until Dumbledore spoke.

“Yeah,” Harry confirms, “He’s back.”

***

After opting to give Dumbledore a Pensieve memory of the courtyard to escape interrogation, Harry is brought to the infirmary. Madame Pomfrey immediately sets to work, and Harry falls asleep.

Harry wakes to moonlight filtering through the window in the infirmary and the feeling of fingers stroking through his hair.

“Never do that to me again,” Tom whispers in his ear.

“What?” Harry slurs out, “get kidnapped?”

Tom doesn’t say anything, just gathers Harry close to his chest. He presses two fingers to the side of Harry’s neck and relaxes as he feels the pulse.

“You are so precious, darling. You scared me.”

“Sorry.”

“Shh. It’s alright now. I’m here with you.”

Harry relaxes again and sinks into slumber with Tom curled around him like a python.

This sets the tone for the next few days leading to Tom’s graduation. Tom is with Harry at all times, and it is a bit overwhelming.

On the day of Tom’s actual graduation, the seventh year is called to talk to Dumbledore and Harry revels in being alone for a few moments. Harry sits by the lake and tries to forget the graveyard (it doesn’t work.)

Draco comes and sits next to him. The Malfoy heir holds himself stiffly. “You need to take off the mind guardians.”

Harry's fingers trace the stones through his shirt. "Why?" he asks. "They were a gift, weren't they?"

"They can be used for families to track family members," Draco whispers. "If the Dark L– if *he's* back, he will make use of that."

Harry notices how pale Draco looks, how shaky his hands are. Harry says, "if you need help, I can help you."

Draco shakes his head and abruptly all vulnerability falls away. "As if I would need the help of a half-blood. Just take off the goddamn mind guardians."

Harry says, "How?" even as his mind runs through all the ways he can protect Draco from ever seeing the monster that is Voldemort.

Draco spits, "Just *ask* them, you half-wit."

"Oh," Harry says. "Should have thought of that ages ago. Erm. Come off, mind guardians?"

The stones immediately detach from Harry's chest and reappear in Harry's hand, glowing and warm. He feels oddly bereft without them. Draco snatches them out of Harry's hand and storms away. Harry calls after him, but Draco does not turn and continues walking away.

Harry turns out and faces the lake once more, frowning.

***

Tom faces Dumbledore in the man's office. The last time he was in this room, they found Harry together but Dumbledore went to get the artist on his own. Tom has neither forgiven nor forgotten.

"I would like to offer you an apprenticeship for the next few years," Dumbledore says. "You will be a credit to this school and to my legacy. It will help you with any profession you choose to pursue. I have never offered this to anyone else."

"Why me?" Tom asks.

"I made a mistake once. I kept someone out of teaching when I should have encouraged them. I dislike repeating history. You are strong, talented, and can cast a Patronus. I believe you would make an excellent Hogwarts Professor one day, with the proper training. I'll confess wanting to nurture that in you. Think about it, Tom."

Tom considers. "You know, I looked into Missy Damier."

If Dumbledore is surprised by this turn in the conversation, he does not show it. "Oh?"

"You got her name wrong. There are no records of her anywhere." Tom says.

"Apologies," Dumbledore says, "Her real name was Melissa D'Ambrosio, wasn't it? With age, the memory can start to go. But her story is still the same. She came to Hogwarts late, sorted into Slytherin, and saved the most muggles of anyone in the war. It was her choices that defined her, Tom, not her name."

"Still," Tom begins, "Not remembering someone's name --"

Dumbledore leans forward. "Can be a way of acknowledging that people are more than what others call them. And you would know all about that, wouldn't you, *Mr. Riddle?"*

Tom flinches back as if struck. "That's not my name, I don't know any _"

"It's alright, Tom. I have known this the whole time. And I knew that it didn't matter in the slightest. It's our choices that define us, not our pasts. Do let me know about your answer to the apprenticeship," Dumbledore smiles warmly at Tom and says, genuine as anything, "Congratulations on your graduation."

Tom bites the inside of his cheek. "Thank you, Professor."

Dumbledore's twinkling eyes haunt him on his way out.

***

Tom is in a boat with Beatrice when his robes change colors. The yellow and black stripes fade away until he's simply in Hogwarts robes. There are no houses outside of school.

Tom's been inside the confines of this castle for five decades. There are dark days of isolation behind him within the castle walls, and memories of love, heartbreak, and home. As he sails with Beatrice toward the shore he recalls sailing to this school when he was just

eleven years old, battle-hardened and filled with hope.

He feels hopeful today as the sun shines down from an azure sky, golden and warm. The sun is setting slowly. Tom's future will hold many more days of darkness, heartbreak, and love. But those are the things that make Tom feel alive. And that's all he wished to be for fifty years, *alive.*

Sailing away from Hogwarts feels a lot like saying goodbye. This is the place where he learned how to levitate feathers and eat with fancy forks. He drank his first sips of firewhisky in the Slytherin common room at just fourteen years old with Abraxus. He learned to cast a Patronus on Sprout's couch.

"I think I'll miss it," Beatrice says at his side.

"Yeah," Tom says, somber, "I think I will too."

Beatrice Haywood puts an arm around his shoulders and Tom lets her. They go on like that, arms entwined around one another, as the boat drifts steadily on toward the shore.

There's such power, Tom can't help but think, in greeting the golden sun with someone he cares about. There's such power in having people to care about.

Tom and Beatrice watch together as pinks and orange and purples streak across the sky, painting their world into magic. On the beach they'll reach eventually there's a future as flimsy as smoke and enduring as time.

This feels a lot like saying goodbye. It also feels like growing up.

Between the waves and the shore lies this moment, one of quiet joy and boundless hope.

END OF PART 3

Chapter End Notes

> And there you have it. A graduated Tom. How many of you guessed that Dumbles knew from the get-go? Also, do people feel like Petunia or Dumbledore is more right?
>
> Also: @Dumbledore for thinking being able to cast a Patronus is the only character test that matters.
>
> ANYWHO you know the drill by now: please leave a kudos or comment if you feel so inclined. You will have my gratitude but I suppose you have it already for being here.
>
> TlDr: please comment so I know I am not writing into the void

Hope

Chapter Notes

We are now at part 4 of this fic. Some house-keeping things:

If you have any art you want to be featured, please email me at maytal.w.booth@gmail.com

DF is about to get a bit darker, just as the books do around this point.

There will be PSAs about sensitive things. If I feel like I would spoil things by putting them up here, I'll say to go to endnotes to see those warnings. If people feel the rating should rise, I will raise it.

I am not going to write explicit sex scenes though, just so you know.

Also, I will say that even as the fic gets darker in some places, it will still have breaks and levity. This will not be needlessly sad and will have a conclusion that is worthwhile. Bear with me, and enjoy the ride.

Thank you, dear readers, for being here with me.

PSA for this chapter: some food issues, vague reference to child neglect

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This is magic, pure and simple. This is a new way of looking at the world. Like Dorothy in Oz, the world has taken on an emerald hue.

Voldemort's footsteps barely make a sound as his bare feet press against the cool marble floors of Malfoy Manor. Black robes billow around his thin form, shadows uncurling and unfurling as he strides. Next to him, the Malfoy family are pale and yet they look so achingly *human.*

Voldemort comes to a stop in a great room, looking up at an enormous

painting of albino peacocks frolicking in a winter wonderland.

“What a delightful scene,” he notes. “Harry Potter is the painter?”

Lucius Malfoy swallows and clutches his cane with white knuckles. “Yes, my Lord.”

“Burn it.” The command is said tonelessly.

“My Lord, the piece is priceless, it’s the first painting Potter ever sold…” Narcissa says. Draco closes his eyes and flinches back as if expecting a strike.

Voldemort tilts his head. “Harry Potter will be dead before two summers come and go. I intend to erase him entirely from history. That you would cling to the work of someone who will cease to exist…it makes me doubt your loyalty.”

Narcissa sinks into a graceful half-bow. “Forgive me, my Lord. I was merely overcome for a moment.”

Voldemort licks his lips, a serpentine tongue flicking out and tasting the air. “I assumed. Burn it yourself, Lucius, or I shall lock your whole family inside this house and leave you all to the blaze along with it.”

Draco trembles and Voldemort relishes seeing a pureblood prince so broken down and humiliated.

Lucius raises a shaky hand. “Incendio,” he murmurs.

The painting immediately ignites in one corner. Flames lap at the canvas, consuming and burning the landscape until only ash remains. Narcissa covers her ears as the peacocks scream as they are engulfed in fire. The smell of rotting flesh and burned wood permeates the room.

The marble wall is covered in scorch marks.

Voldemort lays a hand on Lucius's head in a gesture that grossly imitates paternal affection. "Well done, Lucius. But you realize my wrath is all-encompassing. You failed me. This is the beginning." Voldemort sets his crimson gaze on Draco and licks his lips once more.

***

Harry is drowning. He feels water entering his lungs, burning icy cold, with every inhale. He kicks his feet but it's so dark. He doesn't know where the surface is any longer. He sinks impossibly deeper down, down, down, frozen to the bone as bubbles of his own failing breath brush his sides. He tries to scream to let someone know, anyone know, that he is dying here in this darkness all alone, but all he gets is another mouthful of salty seawater.

"HARRY!"

Someone is calling for him but they're so far away. No matter what Harry does, he will not survive this. He goes limp.

"Harry, you're okay, you're okay."

It’s warmer now, Harry notices. Hot almost.

He can breathe.

With a sense of slight panic, Harry realizes his eyes are closed. He opens them as his heart beats far too quickly in his chest.

It takes him a moment to orient himself. It is dark, that’s true. And he is wet. But he is not drowning as he had feared. His head is pillowed in Tom’s lap. Tom is brushing Harry’s hair off his forehead and gently tugging on soft strands of hair.

Harry is tangled in satin bedsheets, tears dripping sideways down his face. He must have swallowed some tears when he was..dreaming. Because that’s all the drowning was: a dream. It was a terrible, terrible dream.

But his painting being destroyed, those poor peacocks burning, wasn’t a dream. Draco's life is truly in the hands of a monster. Harry curls in on himself and lets out a slight whimper.

“You’re safe,” Tom whispers.

“From what?” Harry asks in a cracking voice.

Tom’s fingers pause for a moment before resuming their ministrations. “From danger, right now. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

Harry pushes himself into a seated position and pulls away from Tom. He holds out his left hand and watches as it shakes with a tremor. A side effect, he's been told, of being held under the cruciatus.

("It will get better, dear," Madame Pomfrey had said. "This was your first-time exposed and it wasn't too long, so symptoms do tend to clear up around two or three months. You can build up a tolerance with repeated low exposure, but well… let's hope it doesn't come to that. You'll be right as rain by the new school year.")

Tom seems to agree with Pomfrey because he clasps Harry's hand tight and says, "You know the shaking won't last forever. You know that."

Harry looks away from Tom. There's a feeling of anguish that Harry can't let go of. "I will always be someone who was tortured when I was fourteen because I dared to survive a madman when I was a baby. It's not… it's not just about the hand, Tom. You get that, right? I'm not…I'm not…"

Tom is still holding on to Harry's left hand. With his free hand, he gently clasps Harry's chin and turns Harry's head back toward him. He leans forward and presses a light kiss to Harry's lips, and then another to his forehead.

"I understand."

Harry bows his head. He knows that Tom is lying.

Harry doesn't leave the room for that day and instead asks Kreacher for some painting supplies. Kreacher goes overboard and comes back with what seems to be the entire stock of 'Waterhouse Spellbound Artistry and Mediums." Kreacher helpfully arranges the canvases,

paints, clays, brushes, palette knives, pencils, and everything else into labeled boxes.

Harry sits on the floor with a blank canvas and a loosely held pencil and stares at the hint of sunlight dripping through the closed curtains. He takes comfort that the room is stuffy and warm and relies on every sense to prove that he is alive…alive…alive.

He intends on that first day to draw the peacocks, but he doesn't. He draws nothing.

When Tom comes up with dinner, he says, "What did you create today, love?"

Harry says, "I didn't."

He doesn't eat dinner either, despite Tom's urging.

That night, Harry lies in bed with Tom without touching him, just side by side on a large bed.

"Do you know that peacocks can scream?" Harry asks.

Tom says, quietly, "I did."

Harry stares at the ceiling. "It's an awful sound."

"It is." Tom agrees.

Harry closes his eyes. He will mourn tonight for his first real painting.

He wakes screaming, flashes of red eyes and a tall skeletal man haunting his mind. His scar is bleeding.

Harry is thrashing so much that Tom pins him on the bed, Harry's wrists held in Tom's hands.

"Settle," Tom commands, breathing heavily. His fingers are tight against Harry's wrists and Harry is irrationally angry.

"Let go," Harry spits. "You're hurting me."

Tom leans down and brushes his lips close to Harry's ears. "Then calm down, darling. Stop fighting."

"Stop fighting?" Harry echoes. "What are you, my enemy? Let go, Tom. And get out after."

Tom rears back, "What?"

"This is my room," Harry says. "I want to be alone."

Tom lets go of Harry's wrists. His eyes are stormy.

"If that's what you want," he slams the door on his way out. Harry

gently massages one wrist, and then the other. He holds his hands out in front of him and watches as they shake. He slams his hands against the pillows, once, twice, and then breathes out.

He decides to stand, and with shaky legs crosses to the window.

It's night still or very early morning. Harry opens the window blinds and stares out at the dark sky and clouds catching glimmers of moonlight at their edges.

He goes into the ensuite and takes a cold shower, then emerges in a towel robe.

Without turning on a light, he sits before an enormous blank canvas. This time, he doesn't even hold a brush. He simply stares at the expanse of white and wishes it would swallow him whole.

The sun rises slowly as Harry sits. Tom comes in with breakfast but Harry refuses to eat. Tom leaves as the sun dips from its zenith. It's dusk when Tom comes back with a plate of food.

"I get that you're angry, but you need to eat."

Harry says, "No."

Tom walks forward and turns Harry away from his canvas roughly. "I'm not asking, I'm telling you."

Tom spears a bit of salmon with a fork and presses it to Harry's lips.

“Eat.”

Harry turns his head away and the salmon smears across his cheek. “I’m not hungry.”

Tom says, “I don’t care. You need to eat.”

Harry doesn’t respond.

Tom sighs deeply and then stabs the fork, salmon and all, into the canvas right by Harry’s eyes. “Eat, Harry,” he commands again, visibly shaking with rage. “You need to.”

“Who are you to decide that?” Harry asks. “You’re not my parent.” Harry pulls the fork out of the canvas, vanishes the salmon, and casts a reparo. He stares as the tiny holes in the canvas mend. He tosses the fork back on the plate by Tom and wipes his cheek with the back of his hand.

“Fine then, you want a parent? I’ll bring you a parent.” Tom tears out of the room and returns with Sirius in tow. Sirius is looking paler than Harry’s seen him in a long while.

He kneels by Harry and says, “Harry, we’re worried about you. You need to eat something.”

“Oh,” Harry says, “Like you need to stop drinking?”

Sirius flinches. He looks so beaten down and immediately Harry feels

regret, “I didn’t mean it,” Harry says, “I’m sorry, Sirius. I’m so sorry.”

“No, you did. And you’re right. But raising you hasn’t exactly been sunshine and rainbows.”

Harry remembers the cupboard so viscerally, for a moment he hears the flickering bulb and the thump-thump of Dudley on the stairs.

In the end, the plate of food is cleared away by an angry Kreacher, and Harry huddles under his bedsheets alone, pretending that Tom and Sirius aren’t fighting.

Days pass in a blur, with Harry only very occasionally accepting food from Kreacher and primarily sitting in front of a blank canvas wishing his hands would stop shaking.

It’s on a morning like every other, when Snape appears shrouded in darkness in Harry’s doorway.

“You will cease this senseless moping.”

“Why are you here?” Harry asks.

“It may surprise you, but Voldemort’s return is quite the catastrophe even for people outside of you. There are few places where concerned parties can meet. Here is one of them.”

“Hmm,” Harry says. He cannot find it in himself to be embarrassed that his former professor is staring down at him while he is wearing

nothing more than thin blue pajamas that hang too loosely on his shrinking frame.

“You will end this moldering, Potter. It is unbecoming and childish.”

Harry stares into Snape’s soul and is struck by the sudden desire to hurt the man in front of him. “You’d know, wouldn’t you? How to stop moping? How many years have you been in love with a dead woman?”

Snape does not even blink. His black eyes glitter and he looks down at Harry with malice. “That was unexpectedly cruel, Potter.”

Harry’s shame has grown over these past few weeks, and so he whispers, “Maybe I am cruel.”

“No,” Snape refutes. “You disgust me. You are self-centered, unaware, and stubborn to the point of stupidity. But you are not cruel, Harry Potter. You are just hurt. Pull yourself together.”

With that, Snape sweeps out of the room. Harry feels oddly lighter. Snape’s consistency was, in a way, comforting.

Harry lifts one hand. It still shakes, but it’s better than it was yesterday.

He opens several colors of paints and puts them into his palette. Then he dips a finger into a green, the color of emeralds, and presses his finger to the canvas.

With his fingers, he spreads the paint all around. For the first time, he doesn't try to paint anything. He doesn't have any images in his mind. He lets the world fall away and focuses only on his heartbeat, the ambient light, and the heat of the room. He simply allows himself to feel.

***

Tom is sitting at the dining room table next to Sirius. Sirius' leather jacket smells of cigarette smoke.

The Weasley parents, Lupin, another Black named Nymphadora Tonks, the real Moody, and Dumbledore and Snape and others all sit with them.

For the past few days, while Harry's been worrying everyone, the order of the Phoenix has taken hold of the house. Sirius and Tom reconciled over their disgust for the name and its tactics, generally. Ron and Hermione are apparently coming to the house to stay for the rest of the summer soon. Tom is part of the order now because he accepted Dumbledore's apprenticeship.

Kreacher hates all of the order, except maybe for Nymphadora. He has a grudging respect for her. He says, often, "Metamorphagus. A strong Black trait."

Molly says, "Shouldn't someone go check up on Harry? Snape spoke to him yesterday and I think perhaps I could go today?"

"He needs space," Sirius says. "He's in a foul mood."

“He needs mind healers and a vacation to the Caribbean,” Snape says, “but barring that, he needs time.”

“Harry is resilient,” Dumbledore says. “I am sure that us speaking behind his back accomplishes little. Let us instead discuss our strategies…”

Sirius leans over to whisper to Tom, “D’you reckon Dumbie Dore ever had a genuine human emotion in his life?”

Tom replies, “Bet he felt horror the first time lemon drops gave him a cavity. Imagine, being betrayed by something you love.”

Sirius snorts and tries to pass it off as a cough.

***

Harry finishes his painting and takes another shower, rinsing off paint and grime.

He towels off and dresses in a pair of slacks and a sweater. He’s barely finished dressing when there’s a knock on his door.

“Come in,” he calls.

Dumbledore walks into the room with a pleasant expression. “Good evening. How are you, my boy?” It feels genuine, like Dumbledore is really asking.

“Been better,” Harry says.

“Yes, I can see why,” Dumbledore says nothing else and Harry takes comfort in the silence.

Dumbledore instead turns his expression to the canvas. It is a mass of colors, blue and pinks, dusty oranges, and vibrant reds. They all twist and turn around one another on a dark canvas. There’s something raw and rich about the way they pulse. It’s as if someone painted not what a heart looks like, but what a heart is.

Dumbledore’s eyes tear up. “It’s remarkable. I apologize for asking, but what exactly have you painted here?”

Harry tries to answer. At first, he doesn’t know how to define it. He painted pain and anguish and self-hatred. He painted the anger he had for yesterday and the wishes he has for tomorrow. He painted the feeling of a rope fraying beneath his fingertips as he hangs by the side of the cliff, and the feeling of holding on tightly to that fraying rope because the pain and blisters and fear will not last forever.

Harry finds his answer at last.

“Hope. I painted hope.”

Chapter End Notes

I kind of wanted Harry to get some abstract art up in here. AHAHAHAHAHA

Please leave a kudos if you feel so inclined and a comment so I know I am not writing into the void.

And, if you are a void-dweller, well done you brave and unfortunate soul. Leave a comment to uphold your legacy.

Liar

Chapter Notes

Sorry for how long this took to get up. I've been having some pretty bad writer's block and I am entirely certain that this is the worst chapter of the fic.

I decided that this chapter just needed to be written more than it needed me to sit on it, wringing my hands. Thank you folks for reading this fic and continuing to leave comments. Even if I don't always respond, they mean everything to me.

PSA: There's a slight bit of torture and discussions of self-harm this chapter

If you absolutely hate Umbridge and don't want to read about her, assume she's awful and skip ahead to chapter 31

See the end of the chapter for more notes

This incredible artwork was made by instagram artist @theskycat and shows Harry as he creates his abstract art, "hope". Check out their insta for more great pieces!

The magic begins with a tentative stroke of soft graphite across the back of a discarded receipt.

The blood on his hand wells up into a glistening bead. It swells until is fat and filled to bursting. Then, the blood spills over and drips down his hand and onto parchment. At the front of the room, Umbridge sits with a nasty and satisfied smile. Harry grits his teeth and keeps going.

***

The summer ends with “Hope” getting sold in a goblin-run auction. Two days before the return to Hogwarts they sell it to a wealthy French man for 2 million galleons. It breaks all kinds of records and Harry is officially one of the best-selling magical artists of all time. He is also a very new fifteen. The goblins are, needless to say, endlessly smug. Tom relishes in the knowledge that the rest of the world is catching on to how incredible Harry is - the boy not the legend - after Harry already belongs to Tom.

Unfortunately, the media in the U.K. is not kind to Harry. The newspapers are splashed daily with headlines claiming that Harry made up Voldemort’s return. They call him attention-seeking, deranged, a lunatic. They say that perhaps Harry can only have a genius with art because he is so broken on the inside.

Tom tries to shield Harry as best as he can from the articles and instead plies his darling with words of encouragement and praise. Harry is like a flower in the sunlight whenever Tom gives him praise. He thrives on it. Tom hopes that one day Harry will be so reliant on Tom for making him feel better he will hardly be able to stand without Tom’s support.

After a successful dinner with his darling and Sirius, Dumbledore comes to the house and asks Tom to join him in one of the studies.

“I am placing my trust in you,” Dumbledore says. His eyes a set and dark.

“As your apprentice, you mean?”

“As such. And so, if ever one student dies at your hand, if there is one petrification, one suspected imperio, I will snap your wand and send you straight to Azkaban. Am I understood?”

Tom cocks his head, “Where was this protective spirit when there was a death tournament at your school?”

Dumbledore merely repeats, voice cold, “Am I understood?”

Tom sighs. “I swear it. I won’t be like the boy I was.”

Dumbledore relaxes infinitesimally. “You already are twice the boy you were, Tom.”

Tom resists the urge to ask, “really?” like a child and instead settles on a nod.

Dumbledore says, "If you need to maintain a close relationship with Harry, I shan't get in your way," and he gives Tom a somewhat saucy and entirely merry wink before exiting the study.

Tom shudders with the realization that a winking Dumbledore has forever burned itself as an image into Tom's mind.

***

Harry is sitting on a ledge in Grimmauld place by an open window, swinging his legs and letting cool London air wash over him. Tomorrow, he will leave this summer home and quasi prison for Hogwarts. His “hope” painting has been hung up somewhere in the house and Dumbledore is long since gone. Harry can’t remember any longer if he loves or hates the headmaster. It’s all gotten jumbled up and the emotions don’t feel as far away from one another as they used to in his heart.

Sirius settles down beside Harry on the ledge with a grunt and his leather jacket smells strongly of smoke. He holds a cigarette in his hand and breathes it in before releasing a puff out through the open window. The smoke curls hazy and lazy in the air before getting caught in the wind and riding the currents away.

“You know, I thought the world ended when my brother died,” Sirius says.

Harry nods, “Gathered that much, yeah.”

“Ah yes, my drunken ramblings. Great stuff for learning all the shit in my past. I also thought the world ended when your grandparents died. And when my messed up fucking parents died. And then I knew the world ended when your parents died.”

Harry can’t imagine what the point of this conversation is but he says, “I’m sorry,” because that’s what people say to mourners.

“Look, kid, I’m not doing this to give you an invite to my pity party. It’s pretty pathetic and not much of a party. Point is, I thought the world was ending pretty much my whole life. And I bet you felt like

the world was ending too when you got tortured with a curse so strong it can drive people insane. When you saw the ugly mug of Voldimortimer himself. But you looked at the world ending and decided to choose hope. That's…you're amazing, you know that? I just fell apart."

Sirius takes another drag of the cigarette as he waits for Harry to answer.

Harry inhales slowly and then exhales. "I think I am falling apart," he says simply. "But I'm also putting myself back together. Like you. Can I get a drag?"

Sirius immediately holds his cigarettes out of reach and shakes his head vigorously. "Definitely not. This shit kills."

"Then why do you smoke?"

"Do as I say, not as I do," is all Sirius says as a response. He ruffles Harry's hair. Harry feels anxiety over Sirius's health bubble up. He locks it down so he can just enjoy this moment.

"Stingy," Harry complains. He stays on the ledge with Sirius and after a while, Sirius resumes his smoking. The scent of cigarette smoke permeates the evening. Harry leans his head on Sirius' shoulder and watches the sunset against the smog of London and lets the last day of summer hols wash over him.

This was the best summer of his life.

***

The great feast is muted and the air feels stifling. The hat calls out a warning and people keep looking at Harry as though he is a murderer. Draco's eyebags are dark and sunken. His skin is almost unearthly in its paleness. He looks sickly – almost corpse-like. With his hair slicked back artfully and him wearing his fine school robes, he may as well be embalmed. He does not look at her once.

Tom sitting at the high table next to Dumbledore and introduced as the headmaster's apprentice only adds to Ginny's growing sense of unease. Even if Tom is changing, there is something dark that has sunk its claws so deep inside him he can never escape its grasp.

The new defense against the dark arts teacher seems to be the worst one Ginny's ever seen. She wears pink all the way down and spews propaganda as though it is holy words.

Ginny barely tastes anything on her plate. When the feast is over, she stands quickly and leaves before anyone else. She makes her way to an alcove near the dungeons and successfully grabs Draco inside as he's walking toward the dorm. A prefect badge shines proudly on his chest.

"Weasley," he greets, a flush marking his cheekbones. The light pink stands out in stark contrast to the pallor of his skin. He grits his teeth and returns to a monotone shade of white. "Let go."

Ginny does not drop her hands from his shoulders and instead pushes him into the wall of the alcove. There's a tapestry that hides them from the hall.

Draco's eyes widen in panic. "I said let go, Weasley."

“Make me,” she growls and fists his tie, dragging him down for a kiss. At first, he is rigid beneath her, but then his hands come to grasp her waist and he pulls her closer, closer, closer, until their heartbeats are pressed right against one another.

He gasps against her lips and then kisses her like he is a starving man. One hand leaves her back to tangle in her hair. He yanks her head back further and presses forward, licking into her mouth until she is dizzy and breathless. When he pulls back, the flush has returned to his cheeks and his eyes are open and vulnerable. They are molten silver.

“Congratulations on becoming a prefect,” she says.

His voice is soft when he says, “Thank you, Ginevra.” He traces her cheek with the hand that had been tangled in her hair.

He is the only person who calls her that. Her toes curl and she stares up at him sure she looks utterly besotted. “I missed you over the summer.”

All at once, the mask slides back into place and Draco shoves her away. He fixes his tie and sniffs disdainfully. “I cannot say the same.”

Ginny is all at once wrong-footed. “What?”

“I never intended for you to be anything to me. I would apologize if you felt like we ever meant something to each other, but you are just a *Weasely.”*

“Draco, what the hell?”

He looks distinctly uncomfortable when he says, “Kindly call me Malfoy.”

“You kissed me not even two minutes ago! You took me to the Yule ball. What the fuck do you mean that you never intended us to be something?” Ginny feels the tell-tale heat in her eyes indicating oncoming tears.

“Stupid girl,” Draco sneers, “I used you because I was mad at my father. It meant *nothing.* Not every story is a love story.”

Ginny turns her head so she doesn’t have to see his awful expression. She says, haltingly, “I know that. I *know* that,” she takes a shuddering breath. “I just thought that ours was.”

When she turns back, the alcove is empty.

***

“How’s it feel to be fucking a professor and to have fucked the whole wizard world with your lies?” Finnigan asks as soon as Harry and Ron enter the dorm. His arms are crossed over his chest.

“How’s it feel to be a prick?” Ron counters. “Bad, I hope.”

“Tom’s not a professor,” Harry responds.

“He’s Dumbledore’s apprentice,” Thomas says. “He may as well be.”

“You always need to be the center of attention, don’t you Harry?” Finnigan says.

“I’m not a liar either,” Harry says.

“Oh, and you want us to believe he-who-must-not-be-named is back, do you?” Finnigan says.

“He is,” Harry says.

“You were the only person to see that. Convenient, innit?” Finnigan asks rhetorically. “Send the whole world into a panic right before you sell a painting and make a couple of mill. Good advertising.”

“You think I’m lying to what? Sell paintings?” Harry asks, appalled. He holds out his left hand which still has a slight tremor. “You see this? This is a tremor. Which I got from the *cruciatus* . Tell me, what artist risks permanent nerve damage for some attention? And how did I exactly torture myself?”

Ron places a hand on Harry’s shoulder in solidarity and spits, “I’m ashamed to be in the same house as you two,” looking toward Thomas and Finnigan. Harry knew people thought he was lying, but he didn’t realize it would bother him this much. Finnigan and Thomas (Seamus and Dean) have known Harry for four years. They should believe in him, right? He stares at them and turns right around and leaves the room. He can’t stand to look at them.

Harry leaves the Gryffindor dorms and wanders around the castle. He

stops in front of a door on the fifth floor of the castle that says, “Black, Tom, Headmaster’s Apprentice” on a gold-swirled plaque. Harry raps his knuckles once, twice, and the door swings open.

The room is small. There’s a twin bed in one corner, a yellow rug, a window, and a desk. Above the desk, there are shelves filled with books. Tom is sitting on the bed reading something, and he looks up when Harry comes in.

Harry shuts the door behind him. He shuffles as Tom closes his book and sets it aside.

“Do you need something, darling?” He asks.

“My housemates don’t believe me. About Voldemort.”

Harry must be visibly upset by this because Tom opens his arms and says, “Come here, dearest. I believe you.” Harry climbs onto Tom’s bed and crawls into Tom’s open arms.

Tom tilts Harry’s head toward him. “I would very much like to kiss you now, darling. May I?”

Harry says, “Yes.”

Tom’s hand grips the back of Harry’s head as he pulls the younger boy toward him. He starts off sweetly, doting even, with light closed-mouth kisses. His teeth catch and tug softly on Harry’s lower lips. Harry’s eyes flutter shut and he lets out a quiet moan. He wants to crawl inside Tom. He wants Tom to take everything away.

Harry melts into Tom and the kiss picks up pace. Tom's teeth clash against Harry's before Harry opens his mouth. Tom's tongue lightly brushes Harry's in a greeting. Harry tries to get closer to Tom, to gain some control, but Tom grips Harry's hair and tugs him to the side. He kisses down the side of Harry's neck and whispers, "you are a marvel, sweetheart. You are far from the liar they call you. You are honest and beautiful."

Harry whimpers. Both of Tom's hands come up to cup Harry's cheeks and cradle him. He is controlling and gentle as he presses his lips to Harry's once more, kissing him lovingly. Harry feels warmth cascade down him like a waterfall. It's too much, to be called beautiful and be so adored so shortly after being called a liar. Harry tries to pull away.

Tom catches his wrists and tucks them expertly in the small of his back. "Don't pull away from me, dearest. Let me love you."

Harry nods, once, and lets himself get kissed again, and again, hands still behind his back. Finally, when Tom feels it's been long enough, Harry is pulled down and gently rolled onto his side. Tom slides in behind him and tucks his chin on the back of Harry's neck. He plays with Harry's hair absently.

"I will be going on a trip with Dumbledore tomorrow. I would normally tell you to go back to your dorm, but as I don't how long I'll be away, why don't you stay the night?" Tom asks.

The bed is too small for two people, especially when one is as tall as Tom. Harry is already overly warm. He says, anyway, "that sounds perfect."

In the morning, they dine together, and then Harry heads to Defense.

Ron and Hermione are already in the room and he slides next to them.

“Where were you?” Hermione asks. “At breakfast?”

“With Tom,” Harry whispers.

“Did you eat?” She inquires, intensely.

“I did.”

She relaxes, “Well that’s good, then.”

Harry says, “It is.”

When the other Gryffindors come in, they stare at Harry awkwardly and rub the backs of their neck. When Umbridge, the new pink toad of a defense professor enters the room, the first thing she chirps is “Wands away. There will be no need to talk this class.”

Hermione raises her hand straight in the air. Umbridge continues as though Hermione is invisible, “Begin reading at chapter three of your books.”

Hermione waves her hand. Umbridge’s eyes twitch. Harry calls out, “I think Hermione has a question, professor.”

“And you felt the need to speak when I said there was ‘ *no need to*

speak', Mr. Potter? My, my, the obsessive need to be noticed is quite strong in you."

"Erm," Harry says in the face of the antagonism, "Thank you?"

"Lying about you know who and speaking out in class, why, I think I'll have to assign you detention. Come to my office at seven tonight. And ten points from Gryffindor."

"But *how* can we practice spells without wands or ***speaking***?" Hermione bursts out.

Umbridge grins. "Another ten points from Gryffindor for speaking out. And really, what could I have expected from a muggleborn?" Umbridge titters. "Certainly not manners. To answer your question, though, you won't be practicing spells. The theory is after all a large component of your O.W.L. exams."

Hermione glares at Umbridge so hard Harry thinks the awful woman may just catch fire. Hermione mutters under her breath, "Wands away? More likes minds away."

When Harry reports to the defense office for detention, Tom has already gone on his trip with Dumbledore. It's not even the end of the first day and Harry already has detention with someone who hates him.

Umbridge says, "I think lines today should just about do it."

Harry sighs. Of all the things to do in detention, lines are merely tedious. "What do you want me to write?"

“‘I must not tell lies.’ You really need to stop spreading misinformation, Mr. Potter.”

Harry wants to protest that he has not lied about Voldemort but he can tell Umbridge will never listen. He merely nods and pulls out parchment and a quill.

“Oh no, use this quill,” Umbridge says, handing Harry a long black quill that is wickedly sharp at one end.

Harry recognizes it. He’s read about quills just like these time and time again when researching soul painters. “But that’s a blood quill,” Harry hears himself as though he is out of his body.

“So it is,” Umbridge agrees.

Harry can’t tell if Umbridge knows just what blood quills have been used for people just like him. He says, “I can’t write with a blood quill.”

“Oh but you can, Mr. Potter. You can either write what I tell you to write… or… you can draw a self-portrait. Your choice.”

Harry shudders. She knows. She knows exactly how soul painters commit suicide.

“If I say no?” He inquires.

“I will expel you. It is rather unfortunate, but the school charter allows professor discretion to expel students who refuse punishment.” Her countenance shows she finds this fact far from unfortunate. Getting expelled is something Harry cannot do. With a trembling hand, he grips the quill and begins to write the letter, “I.” At the same time, the word appears on the back of Harry's right hand, cut into his skin as though traced there by a scalpel--yet even as he stares at the shining cut, the skin heals over again, leaving the place where it had been slightly redder than before but quite smooth. He looks back at the parchment, places the quill upon it once more, writes “I must not tell lies,” and feels the searing pain on the back of his hand for a second time; once again, the words cut into his skin, and once again they heal over seconds later.

He keeps repeating, repeating, repeating. The healing slows. He imagines the hours it would take to make a self-portrait. The pain he would bear and the beauty of his immortalized soul-filled in with wet crimson.

The blood on his hand wells up into a glistening bead. It swells until is fat and filled to bursting. Then, the blood spills over and drips down his hand and onto parchment. At the front of the room, Umbridge sits with a nasty and satisfied smile. Harry grits his teeth and keeps going. The words (wounds) stop healing.

Chapter End Notes

Nasty things, blood quills. Feel free to go back to chapter 21 if you want a quick refresher on why exactly blood quills are such a goshdarn bad vibe.

What are Tom and Dumbledore up to?

Some common questions: answered.

Q: Why didn't Harry just walk out like he did with potions?
A: So the school sees Harry rn as both student and master. Harry could potentially be expelled (although Snape was not able to do so bc he A, didn't try, and B, Dumbles would never let him) and then become a resident scholar rather than a student

The ministry could (and would) snap his wand

Also, he's a bit intrigued by blood quills even though he knows he shouldn't be -- like how lots of people go diving with sharks even though there are accidents sometimes. Harry is curious to see blood as pigment etc etc

Also, Umbridge is lying and probably does not have the power to do so, but how would Harry know that? He's a bit dazed by the whole blood quill

Q: Why is this so much more horrific than in the canon books and why am I doing this to all of you?
A: I think canon was horrific and Harry never asks what would happen if he said no. He does here. I went back and re-read book five and I personally think there's the added dimension of soul-seers here, but the mechanism itself is about the same in both places

PSA PLEASE READ

I hate Umbridge. I will not let her play a big part in this story. If you are feeling right now that you don't want to slog through another year of tortured Harry, I beg of you, please read the next chapter. This one was hard to write and I'm not super happy with it and I stg the next one is better

Please leave a kudos or a comment if you feel so inclined. They mean so much to me :)

Up next: lockets and chalices

Heir

Chapter Notes

Okay, we got new readers, some people have joined the PARTY and I give you a warm welcome

This chapter is a bit of doozy - see chapter end notes for warnings

Writer's block yeeted off for a bit so this was written pretty fast and easily wahaha

Hope y'all are happy and healthy

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Oh, it's beautiful.

Tom leaves Hogwarts with Dumbledore in the early morning feeling empty because he is going on a journey to destroy pieces of the soul he should have kept inside him. He leaves with a folded picture of a dead willow torn from the diary to remind himself of Harry and the sacrifices made to bring Tom into the world Above.

Tom is leaving behind his teenage dream of immortality. Although the promise of death haunts him nightly and he fully intends to at least consider if not pursue other pathways to eternal life, leaving Hogwarts this early morning with Dumbledore is a final farewell to the adolescent he was before the diary. In another lifetime, he might have never emerged from the diary. In another lifetime, he would have spit at Dumbledore and never grown to feel remorse for Myrtle and taken Ginny's life. In another life, he would have rebuked Dumbledore for asking him to help him hunt Horcruxes. In this life, Dumbledore came to him and admitted part of the reason he wanted Tom to become his apprentice is that, "Of all the people in the world, I am sure that you will be able to find them. If you meditate, can you feel where the soul shards reside?"

Tom had closed his eyes and tried to envision how he had felt in the diary when he could feel the phantom soul being torn apart and the

threads of anchor points left behind. Like a map of gold spilling out from his heart he had managed to locate all the points. Some shone more brightly than others – Harry's was a brilliant glimmer, warmer than the rest.

He thought about lying then, but he understood his duty in this war. So instead he nodded and said, "I can feel them. There is one in Grimmauld and another in Gringott's. Three others."

Dumbledore looks at him then, really looks at him, and in that look Tom sees acceptance. It may be manufactured and it is certainly calculated, but when Dumbledore says, "Thank you, Tom. I understand this is a sacrifice," it does make Tom feel better.

The unspoken and disgusting truth is that both of them know the issue of Harry's Horcrux will need to be addressed. The weight of that unspoken fact bears down on both of them. But the day where Tom fights Dumbledore to keep Harry breathing as the man makes callous choices in favor of the greater good is not today. Today, they leave Hogwarts together.

They go first to Grimmauld. Sirius greets Tom with open arms and Tom relaxes into the hold. Kreacher glares from his place in the far corner.

Sirius' embrace helps Tom to feel centered against the looming terror of destroying himself. Sirius smells of pixie wings and firewhisky and smoke and is so familiar it *aches.* Tom put the death of the diadem to the good use of saving Harry's life. With Dumbledore at his side, Tom knows such dark magic is slipping beyond his reach. He also no longer has enough of Harry's blood to go through with the ritual. Destroying a Horcrux now that Tom's felt remorse for Myrtle and he understands so very deeply how awful it is to exist as a soul piece feels akin to murder. It feels reprehensible and wrong. If they were given the chance, couldn't the other Horcruxes become like Tom?

But the pragmatic side of him hints that they could also become murderous, mindless husks, hell-bent on killing his darling. And for that reason, he keeps his head high and his conscience clear. He closes his eyes and concentrates on the Horcrux inside the home. It's in the attic, Kreacher's attic. A necklace - Slytherin's. Dark, more malicious than the diadem.

Tom opens his eyes. He says, "We've come to destroy the locket."

Across the room, Kreacher gives a twisted, grieving, smile. "At long last," he inclines his head, "Thank you, *Master Black* ."

***

The last time Tom touched a Horcrux, he was still one himself, he thinks. There was a kinship he'd felt even as he bound the soul shard in Harry's service. The locket twinkles mockingly in Tom's hold and he feels no familiarity, only disgust.

Dumbledore says, "Be careful, Tom."

Tom says, "I know what I'm doing."

Brother, the locket croons. *Oh, my confused brother.*

Tom grits his teeth, *I am not your brother. Not anymore.*

He drops it and it clatters to the floor.

“Fiendfyre,” he says, turning to Dumbledore, “Can you control it?”

Dumbledore glances down at him, considering. “I can. Shall we cast together? I imagine that will make the burden even easier."

In the end, it is done quickly. A few runes are drawn on the patio outside Grimmauld. A couple of spoken words seal the protective barrier. Fiendfyre blazes. The flame takes the form of a basilisk and devours the locket until only liquid metals remain.

“Do you ever wonder what the spell-makers were thinking,” Tom says, gaze still fixated on the destroyed locket, “when they were building spells such as these?”

Dumbledore releases a heavy sigh, “It does not do to dwell on such things. Still, we wizards are apt at crafting our own demises. Perhaps they were trying to fight fire with fire. And perhaps… they merely wished to destroy.

Tom thinks of the London Blitz and says, “It’s not just wizards that are good at destroying themselves.”

Dumbledore nods with somber eyes, “Indeed. Perhaps a capacity for destruction is part of what it means to be human.

“Perhaps,” Tom says, thinking of Harry and then adding, “But then again, so is a capacity for creation.”

Dumbledore says, “Just so, Tom. Just so.”

***

“Albus Dumbledore,” a goblin greets, voice curling around the name with something between amusement and disgust. “I understand you have an unlawful request for me?” The goblin turns to Tom and says a touch more respectfully, “Mr. Black.”

Dumbledore raises his hand in the air as though in surrender. “I do appreciate you agreeing to meet with us about this, shall we say, unorthodox matter.”

The goblin bares his teeth. “Unorthodox? Impossible. If I understood your letter correctly, you are asking to be granted access to another customer’s vault to destroy their property.”

Dumbledore turns to Tom. If this is to work, his words will need to be perfect. “Actually,” Tom intercedes. “It is my property, unlawfully taken. By right, it belongs to me.”

“And you can prove this?” The goblin asks, ‘Bogrod,’ the name tag reads.

“I can,” Tom says, “the item in question houses a piece of my soul. Also taken without my consent.”

The goblin shudders. “A soul claim, then. We will give you counsel.”

The goblin bids that the two humans follow him. Tom, Dumbledore, and Bogrod walk across the bank. The sound of Tom’s footsteps against the polished stone floors is thunderous. The eyes of other goblins track them as they process.

They are led into a back room. The room is semicircular and built as a

small amphitheater. Sitting in tiered pews are several goblins.

Bogrod stands in front of the audience of his peers and says, “We are here due to a soul claim.”

A goblin says, “A soul claim? It has been long since such things were invoked.”

Dumbledore says, “There is a Horcrux in a goblet in one of your vaults. As the bearer of the soul, Tom here has a claim.”

One elderly goblin says in a tone that is more rasp than voice, “This broken one is complete now.”

Bogrod says, “Broken one?”

The elderly goblin spits, “Wizard soul-filth. Wizard now,” and then descends into gobbledegook. Bogrod responds in kind and then all the goblins join in a strange chorus of overlapping harsh syllables. Dumbledore turns to Tom and whispers, “They’re going to let us in. They are just laying down their terms.”

The hubbub dies down. Bogrod says, “We will allow you to retrieve the artifact. We will watch as you destroy it. We will create a reproduction and replace it in the vault. We will never speak of this again.”

Dumbledore says, “These terms are acceptable.”

The elder goblin says, “Mr. Black will tell the Goblin nation how he became a whole soul after having been a foul soul-piece before.”

Tom closes his eyes and remembers the fleeting sensation of Myrtle’s hand, warm and alive, and says simply, “I felt remorse.”

There is nothing easy about it, even now.

***

The cup is destroyed faster than the locket. Three goblins look on, satisfied.

“Thank you for removing a great evil here,” they say. “Give Mr. Potter our regards.”

“I will,” Dumbledore says.

Tom turns away and pretends he cannot hear the Horcrux screaming as it burns.

***

The two get a bite to eat at a pasta place in muggle London. Tom can’t help but take notice of all of the changes to the city from his memories of the past. The roads have been re-built. People walk around in handsome coats, and high heels, frowning and smiling and living without the kind of terror Tom’s childhood was steeped in. Tom feels both newborn and ancient, legs coltish and unbalanced, face

kissed with a century-old horizon.

“This has been a successful few days,” Dumbledore says, grabbing Tom’s attention back to the plate of gnocchi in front of him.

Tom takes a bite. The flavor of sage and brown butter busts across his tongue, better than anything he ever got to eat in his memories of this city. “I suppose so.”

Dumbledore leans forward. “I am proud of you, Tom.”

Tom says, “You don’t need to treat me like you care, Dumbledore.”

Dumbledore looks impossibly fond and sad, “Oh but I do, Tom. I always did. That’s entirely the problem.”

Tom ignores the statement because he doesn’t want to confront its truth or deception. He looks out the window and says, “Three are left. A ring in the old riddle manor. A snake,” he swallows a long gulp of water, “...Harry.”

Tom wonders if ultimately he’ll have to die as well. Sometimes he has nightmares of fading into nothingness after getting trapped once more in the diary.

Dumbledore hesitates and it’s long enough for Tom to meet the man’s ice-blue star-studded eyes and read genuine shock and pride in those irises, “Ah. Thank you. I will deal with the ring on my own. I can tell the order to make sure the snake dies as well. And Harry… we can cross that bridge when we must.”

Tom gazes back at Dumbledore evenly. “You know I will fight with everything I am to keep that boy breathing, no matter the cost.”

Dumbledore looks skyward and releases a shaky exhale. “I know,” he says, softly. “It is sometimes my belief that makes you a better person than I.”

***

Two detentions after the first, Tom returns to Hogwarts for supper. Dumbledore’s seat remains empty. Harry’s been hiding his bandaged hand from his friends and spending more time in his studio because no one can get him while he is inside. He’s already painted a pulsing heart dripping rubies onto a dark ground because he feels a need to paint with red.

Still, Harry is pale and his appetite has long since abandoned him since spending time with Umbridge. He decides then and there that if she ever asks him to use the quill again, he'll refuse. "Expel me," he'll challenge, "I don't need a wand to do magic."

He can paint without one. He can travel to France and join an art academy and get a wand there. He is sick of hurting himself simply because he is afraid.

“The greatest threat to your life is not you-know-who at this point,” Ron says, “It’s your appetite. Eat something goddamnit.”

“Ronald,” Hermione admonishes, “Don’t yell at him. Still, you are looking quite peaky Harry. I do think you ought to try and eat a bit more.”

Harry sighs and takes another bite of potatoes, “I am trying, you know.”

Ron softens, “We know, mate.”

After dinner, Harry makes to go back to the dorms, when Tom comes up beside him and guides him to Tom’s dorm with a hand on the back of Harry’s neck.

“I missed you,” Tom says.

Pulled up from inside raw and aching, Harry responds, “Me too. You have no idea,” he almost confesses what Umbridge has done but he feels like doing so would make Tom kill her. Tom doesn’t need that blood on his hands.

As soon as the door to Tom’s room is closed, Tom’s hands come up to cradle Harry’s face. He leans down and kisses Harry soft and sweet. A hand goes to the back of Harry’s head and strokes the hair there lovingly. Harry shivers into the kiss and melts into Tom. He ends the kiss and buries himself in Tom’s arms. He noses against Tom's collarbone.

“What’s happened, hmm?” Tom asks gently, “This is such a warm welcome.”

“Just missed you,” Harry says.

“Did you?” Tom asks, pleased and fond. His hands explore the back of Harry’s neck, slipping down his arms.

A low warning bell goes off in Harry's head and he pulls away – a second too late. Tom traps his right hand with a strong grip. Tom stares intently at the bandage.

"What is this?"

"Nothing, just cut myself with a paintbrush, stupid really."

He tries to pull his arm back but Tom does not let him. He unwraps the bandage, revealing the carved-out letters. All at once, Tom's demeanor cools until his aura screams of icy danger.

"Who did this to you." His voice is flat with ill-concealed rage. His anger curls around him. There's a hurricane brewing behind his dark eyes and Harry cannot help but take a step back.

Tom brushes Harry's hair back with his free hand. "I'm not mad at you love, never at you, but I do need a name. Who. Did. This?"

"... I did," Harry mumbles. Technically this is true.

Tom tuts and seems almost like a stranger with how much rage emanates off of him, "Wrong answer, dear heart. Try again. These are wounds from a *blood quill* and I know you don't have one. Who gave it to you?"

Harry keeps his lips closed. Tom tugs Harry forward and strokes the back of Harry's neck with a long finger.

“I don’t want to make you tell me, darling, but I will. Can you be good for me?”

There’s something wrong with Tom’s words. They feel so reasonable. Harry wants to be good. He wants to stop hurting. He’s so tired. “Umbridge,” he admits into Tom’s chest. “I'm handling it. Please don’t kill her.”

Tom has gone rigid around Harry. “Of course not,” he says stiffly. “ *I* won’t kill her. But please understand, I will remove her as a professor.”

“Okay,” Harry says. “Okay.” He wonders if he is a monster for knowing that Tom is lying and he will kill Umbridge somehow and yet he can’t bring himself to care. He doesn't really want to be expelled. He lets himself be led to Tom's bed. He lets his hair be stroked and his breathing even out as he drifts to sleep. He lets himself close his eyes, to everything.

Voldemort’s words come to mind.

“Child, there is no true evil. There is no redemption either. At our core, we are all born from nothingness and fighting desperately to never return to that void from which we come. All that matters is power. You can dress up your choices as pretty as you like but in the end, the only person you fool is yourself.”

***

“Thank you for agreeing to meet with me,” Tom says, keeping his voice polite and eager as he sits across from Umbridge in her pink-covered office, “What I learned about Dumbledore –”

Umbridge smiles widely, “Oh no need to thank me, Mr. Black. I do appreciate your coming to me with this. You say he discovered the chamber of secrets?”

Tom glances at the cat plates and then back to Umbridge. His hatred for her is so strong he can taste it. “He did. I would love to show it to you, I really think the ministry ought to control such things, but first…”

“You are making the sensible choice Tom,” Umbridge says, “What else can I help you with?”

“I saw you made Harry use a blood quill,” Tom makes sure he seems admiring, “What made you think of such an ingenious method to hurt him?”

Umbridge falters. “I thought you cared for Mr. Potter?”

“For that dirty half-blood?” Tom sneers. “He is like a dog to me. Sometimes dogs need to be punished.”

Umbrdige titters and relaxes. “Oh, you will make an excellent Lord Black one day. If you must know, it’s because I heard in an auction goblins describe his art as ‘a soul-bound masterpiece.’ Everyone knows that the only soul-seers were purebloods. It felt fitting to make Mr. Potter bleed for putting on airs.”

“Clever,” Tom says, standing, “Shall we head to the chamber then?”

Umbridge shakes with greedy excitement and says, “Yes, let us go then.”

She imperiously commands Tom to bring her to the chamber, pushing children out of the way as they go. They walk down and down into the dungeons of the castle, her murmuring, “Of course, it would be down here, of course.”

When they enter Myrtle’s bathroom, Umbridge looks at him askance. “A girl’s bathroom? One with *flowers*?”

Tom can’t help the smug tone when he says, “Look at the faucets.” It feels wrong, however, to have brought someone so foul to this place. Myrtle's bathroom feels almost sacred. Umbridge does not deserve to be here.

Umbridge looks at the faucets, and as she’s saying, “snakes, of course, smart but not smart enough to hide from me, no,” Tom hisses in parseltongue, “ *open.”*

The wall opens and Umbridge looks back at Tom with the beginning of fear.

“H-how did you do that?”

“I am the heir of Slytherin,” he says with a half-bow, “And you hurt the one person I hold dear.” He steps forward and plucks Umbridge’s wand from her grasp. He didn’t even need to use a spell. He continues advancing, herding Umbridge to the opening. Her fear is palpable and *delicious.*

“You care for Harry, after all?” She says, "I can h-help him. No need to be hasty." Tom continues his slow steps as Umbridge inches back.

“You made him use a *blood quill*.” He takes another step forward. She is right at the entrance to the chamber. “Such a thing is… unforgivable,” he pushes her with all his strength and she falls gracelessly into darkness.

He hisses, “ *Basilisk. I have brought you dinner.”*

As if from very far away he hears the slow slide of coils, and then hissing laughter, followed by crunching and a short-lived feminine scream. *“Thank you, master mine, I was sso hungry. Feed me more, please.”*

Tom thinks of the poetic justice of feeding Voldemort to the basilisk that used to be his. Tom is now the master of this basilisk, Tom Black, and no other. He basks in the feeling of ownership. He is superior to the shell of himself left in the world Above. He is victorious.

“ *Oh, my pet, I intend to. All you need is patience.”*

Chapter End Notes

PSA there are snakes and death in this chapter so... yeah

And the witch is dead. I hate Umbridge. I don't like writing her and I don't like reading about her. Thank goodness Tom is murderous enough that this was in character. This has been planned from the get-go and some of you actually called this so well done. Our murderous Tom finally got his first kill in.

Who do you think the next Defense professor will be?

Stay tuned for the next chapter which features blackened hands and Draco. The chapter after that will be the Dumbledore interlude so get hyped.

Please leave a kudos or comment if you feel so inclined so I know I am not writing into the void.

Defended

Chapter Notes

> And I am back and what's that? An official number of chapters left? This is my guess, give or take two chapters. I think we might really end up with 42 at the most and 39 at the least so I'm going with the lower bound.
>
> Thank you all for your comments, support, and interest. We are hurtling toward the end.
>
> This chapter isn't fully happy but I do think it's a bit lighter than some of the other stuff we've seen

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The beauty makes me wonder…What was I before you?

Harry stirs to the sound of a door clicking softly back into its frame. Early morning sun seeps out red and menacing from the interstitial space between the dark curtain's edges and the window frame.

Harry sits up and stares blindly for a few seconds at Tom's personal apprentice room. How did he get here?

He feels like his mouth was stuffed with cotton during the night and he can still taste it on his tongue. His heartbeat is pounding at an unforgiving rhythm and each pulse reverberates through his skull.

He remembers… he and Tom fought about Umbridge. He asked Tom not to kill her and Tom promised he would not.

But no, before that. What had Tom said?

“I don’t want to make you tell me, darling, but I will. Can you be good for me?”

Tom’s hand had been gently stroking his neck and he’d been tucked into Tom’s chest. It had felt so comforting then. Everything was gentle and safe when Tom spoke those words.

All at once nothing in the world had seemed more reasonable than to tell Tom about Umbridge. It had been almost euphoric. He let go of his personal feelings then and let something else take its place and it had felt so *easy*.

It had felt like curling up in bed, like sipping tea with milk, like slipping into a warm bath.

Harry’s breaths start coming faster.

“ *I don’t want to make you tell me, but I will.”*

On its surface, this could have been an empty threat. But Harry knows Tom better. This was a warning and a command rolled into one package. Reworded, Tom was saying this:

" *Even though I don’t want to do this, I will* ***make you*** *tell me.”*

When Moody cast the imperius on Harry, how did it feel then? What had Moody (fake Moody, at any rate) said about the curse?

“It is the most wonderful feeling. Every thought and worry will be gently

wiped away until all that remains is vague, untraceable happiness. You will feel immensely relaxed and only dimly aware of your surroundings."

Harry hears footsteps and can make out Tom's silhouette at the door taking the few short steps toward the bed.

Tom smells vaguely floral. His soul of blooming flowers flickers with newfound obsidian petals, dark as midnight.

Harry can't help himself when Tom settles on the bed and leans down to press a kiss against Harry's brow.

He flinches.

"What's wrong, darling?" Tom coos, "Did you have a nightmare?"

Harry trembles and scoots away from Tom. His back hits the stone wall.

"Get away from me," He whispers into the sudden stillness of the room.

Tom is unmoving and seems carved of granite, cold and unyielding, for a moment. Then, almost animastically, he lurches forward in pursuit of Harry. He cups the side of Harry's face with one hand.

"This is my room, dearheart. Why should I?" Although Tom's voice is light, there's an intense, almost desperate undercurrent to it.

“You… you imperiused me. You cast an unforgivable on me!” As soon as the words leave Harry’s mouth, he wishes he could take them back. What’s to stop Tom from doing it again? Harry had fought off Moody’s imperius, but Tom’s was stronger. He couldn't resist it.

(And maybe, a quiet part of him whispers, he couldn’t bring himself to fight for Umbridge.)

Tom does not drop his hand from Harry’s face. A flicker of red light paints itself across Tom’s cheeks.

“You’re upset with me,” he notes. “I was doing what I needed to protect you. I told you, I didn’t want to make you tell me, but I *had* to.”

“You *had* to rob me of my free will?” Harry spits, slapping Tom’s hand away.

“When you were using a *blood quill* and refusing to tell me how to help you, yes, I did,” Tom hisses.

“I was handling it!” Harry shouts.

“How?” Tom challenges. “By choosing to attend detentions with Umbridge and cutting your hand open for no reason at all? How can I trust you to ‘handle it’ when all you seem to do is hurt yourself for the sake of being brave or just stubborn?”

“She said she would expel me if I didn’t! And that’s the thing - I was

going to let her expel me. I decided it wasn't worth it. I was handling it."

"And when she gave the quill to other students? When she did it to a muggleborn Hufflepuff, just eleven years old and too scared to tell anyone, what would have happened then? As much as I did this for you, this wasn't only about you, dearest."

Harry explodes, "Even if it wasn't! Even if getting rid of her maybe helped people. Even then – you can't. You can't take my free will from me. It's – it's *unforgivable.* I can't trust you if you ever do, I *can't* ."

"There is no one in this world you can trust more than me when it comes to protecting you! There is *no one* who loves you as I do."

Tom curls his hand to clasp the back of Harry's neck and drags Harry's head forward into a violent kiss. Harry bites Tom's lips viciously but Tom does not relent, kissing Harry with fervor and staining both of their mouths with blood. Harry's eyes flutter closed for half a second, anger and passion making everything feel more vivid and real than anything he's ever felt before. He can feel the softness of Tom's lips, the cool hand on his neck, the tendons in Tom's fingers straining to keep Harry in place. Tingles spread from Harry's head to his feet. Harry gives himself one moment to meet Tom with anger and betrayal and sadness pouring into the kiss. Then he uses his full strength and pushes Tom back.

"Don't touch me," he whispers.

Tom backs up from Harry as though he's been burned and starts pacing around the room.

"Then what?" He asks, "What do you want from me? How do I fix

this?”

Harry brings his knees to his chest. “Did you kill her?”

“ *I* didn’t.”

Harry shakes his head. “Really? You’re going to play this game with me? Fine then. How did you make sure she died?”

Harry can see Tom’s hesitation. “If I give you my honesty, will that fix this?”

“Maybe not. But if you lie to me so help me Merlin, I will make it so you never see me again.”

Tom’s silhouette goes rigid and Harry hears him mutter, “As if I would ever let you leave,” and Harry wishes for the security of his invisibility cloak. More audibly Tom sighs and then says, “You want to know how she died? Fine. Here’s the truth then. The chamber of secrets is real. I fed her to the basilisk inside.”

“You fed her to a *basilisk?* ” Harry repeats.

“He’s a good basilisk,” Tom retorts. “He was hungry.”

“That doesn’t make murder okay!” Harry shakes himself and takes a calming breath. “A snake. She was eaten by a mythical snake. Okay. Okay.” He slowly unfolds himself from Tom’s bed and stands. “Here’s what’s going to happen. You’re going to take me to the chamber.

You're going to introduce me to your basilisk. And then you're going to leave me alone. I need time to think about everything you've done."

Harry can tell Tom is coiled tight like a cobra waiting to strike. "And for how long will I need to leave you alone?" He asks icily.

"Until I'm ready. That's the only answer you're going to get. If you don't like it, maybe you'll think next time and choose not to steal my free will. If this ever happens even once more, I will leave you and I will not come back."

"Darling, I already told you –"

" *Don't."* The harshness of Harry's voice takes them both by surprise. "Your justifications mean nothing to me right now."

Tom swallows, then nods. "Follow me to see the chamber, then."

Harry says, primly, "Thank you."

***

It takes forty-one days for the ministry to realize Umbridge is missing. It takes this long mostly because none of the children can be bothered to alert any of the professors or their parents that their defense teacher stopped showing up. No one liked her, no one misses her, and everyone likes a free period.

There were a couple of first-years who *almost* wrote home because

they *should definitely have a professor for DADA, right?* but the smart older years in their houses would tuck those eleven-year-olds under their shoulders and say, “We can tutor you, and wouldn’t that be much better?” and then there was quite a bit of inter-year unity and playing of exploding snap outside when the weather permitted.

After eleven days, Harry begins teaching students defense after dinner out on the grounds and soon almost the whole school joins in. No one has ever respected Harry more. Harry asks Tom, stiffly, to help him tutor students and Tom does gladly. He smiles at Harry and hands him water when Harry seems thirsty, but otherwise keeps his distance.

Not a single professor alerts the ministry about Umbride missing namely because why would they? Their lives are much better without the diminutive woman breathing down their necks. Three days of Umbridge were more than enough to scar them.

Dumbledore returns from his travels on day sixteen of Umbridge being missing and is too busy meeting with Snape to notice her absence. Dumbledore also takes to wearing gloves.

A short nod to Tom at breakfast does, however, confirm the destruction of the ring Horcrux. On day twenty-two of Umbridge being missing, Dumbledore makes a vague comment about how, “I did not realize how much Dolores despised eating meals with her colleagues.”

Tom watches as the student body laughs at this comment, shifts uncomfortably, and then does not speak up at all about how they haven’t had a defense professor for just over three weeks.

On day forty-one it is *Filch* who notices the complete and utter absence of Umbridge and *Filch* who alerts the ministry, confiding in Aurors when they come that no matter how awful someone may seem,

it does not do to forget them.

Tom tries not to take it personally that Filch made such a poor choice.

When the Aurors do come, they come in a pack of fifteen. They scour the school looking for Umbridge and find not one trace of her.

They question students about who she was last seen with, but no one remembers because it has been forty-one days since they last saw her and she was so unpleasant every memory of her with someone or on her own blended together.

Tom gloats privately as children answer the Auror questions of, “Where did you last see Umbridge?” with unhelpful answers like, “Who?”

The Aurors begin to rephrase the question as, “When did you last see your defense professor?” but the twins have coached all the students of the school gloriously and nearly every student responds with some variation of, “We were supposed to have a defense professor?” When pushed, older students will say, “I just figured Hogwarts gave up on the class. I mean, no one has ever lasted more than a year. It seemed like this year we just decided to stop trying so hard.”

Tom can tell the Aurors find these answers Unacceptable.

After three days of questions, (It has now been forty-four days since any student has taken DADA and Harry has only *just* begun allowing Tom to speak with him, mostly around the Basilisk Harry has named Ouroboros and is spoiling *terribly*), the minister himself comes to Hogwarts.

Minister Fudge ignores all the students except Draco, to whom he nods respectfully, and then questions all the teachers intensely. He administers Veritaserum in a closed room and Dumbledore benevolently allows it despite the grumblings of the professors and Tom gets to watch the whole thing happen because he is, technically, staff.

It is quite amusing to watch because truthfully no one knows where Umbridge is, or what happened to her, and no, asking them the same question in different ways does not Help.

McGonagall admits under the truth potion that she could not stand Umbridge which makes Minister Fudge's eyes gleam and he yells, "Aha! We have found our culprit. How did you kill Dolores Umbridge?"

The transfiguration professor calmly responds, "I did not kill her."

"Did you hurt her in any way?" An Auror asks.

"I did not hurt her in any way."

"Do you know what happened to her?"

"I haven't the faintest idea."

"Do any of you have an idea of what happened to her?"

Snape says, under the truth potion, “I do not know per se, but I could make a conjecture.”

“If you had to guess what happened to her, what would you guess?” Fudge asks Snape now, looking far more defeated.

“I would suppose her own incompetence led her to some unfortunate circumstance from which she could not extricate herself.”

Fudge then turns to Tom who himself has also been administered Veriteserum and says, “You went on a trip with Dumbledore. Did he ever make plans to remove Umbridge?”

Tom says, “No,” and then, because it is *true,* adds, “He did not speak of her at all.”

“What were you doing with him, then?”

Tom opens his mouth to begin speaking, he is going to say, "Going to beaches," because that question is quite open-ended, but Dumbledore’s face turns suddenly furious and he casts a silencing spell on Tom.

“That, Cornelius, is far outside the tenuous legal grounds you are using to have us under the influence of Veriteraserum. If your questions do not relate to Dolores specifically, you are not allowed to ask them. We are done now.”

Fudge is visibly fuming, but a young Auror shamefacedly retrieves the antidote.

The Veriteraserum antidote is given to each of the staff members. The Aurors and minister leave, defeated.

Dumbledore asks Tom to come with him into his office. He says, while petting a softly trilling Fawkes, “I am disappointed in you and concerned about allowing you to remain my apprentice.”

Tom says, “There were no petrifications, no student deaths, and no talk of the chamber. I did not kill Umbridge and even still, if I had, I did nothing wrong according to your rules.”

Dumbledore sighs deeply. He looks frail and sickly and is hiding one hand in the folds of his robes. “I suppose so. It would be unwise to expect a manticore to behave like a pygmy puff. I knew what you were when I took you. Go on then, Tom. Just don’t dispose of the next professor.”

Dumbledore’s easy acceptance takes Tom by surprise and he is almost certain something is wrong with Dumbledore and that Dumbledore is choosing to sacrifice morals for something greater than the both of them.

Tom says, “Thank you, sir,” and leaves the elderly man alone with a phoenix trilling the notes to a melancholy song.

***

Harry hates to admit it, but the basilisk *is* a good boy. And he was so very hungry before being fed the screaming lady. Harry tries to resist feeling like Umbridge’s death was justified because the poor basilisk needed food. (He does not entirely succeed)

After Tom leaves Harry alone in the chamber, Harry and the basilisk become the very best of friends. The basilisk has been lonely for so long and listens to Harry ranting about Tom happily, only interjecting hisses when appropriate.

" *You remind me of him,"* the basilisk says.

"Who?" Harry asks.

"My maker."

Harry is unsure of how he feels about being compared with Slytherin himself until the basilisk adds, " *It is a compliment. He was never a master only, but a companion too."*

It becomes clear to Harry that Slytherin had almost no friends by the end of his life and influenced the basilisk to become a friend of sorts even though most snakes are quite solitary.

Harry takes Ron and Hermione to meet the basilisk the next day and Ron shrieks, "Harry! That is a monster! A man-eating, terribly poisonous, absolutely terrifyingly long monster."

"No, he's not," Harry says, hotly, "He's just –, actually," and then Harry dissolves into parseltongue asking, *"Do you have a name Basilisk?"*

" *A name? I had one many years ago but I have forgotten. No one has spoken to me in sso long."*

And that – that is so sad. Harry tells of this tragedy to his friends and while Ron still looks absolutely disgusted with the snake, Hermione says, “That is so awful, aw, the poor thing.”

“It’s a bloody basilisk! Not a ‘poor thing,’” Ron shouts.

Hermione says, “That’s very close-minded of you.”

Ron groans and says, “Nutters, the lot of you.”

Hermione frowns thoughtfully and suggests, “Ouroboros! That’s the name of the snake that is swallowing its own tail. In some traditions, it destroys the world. In others, it renews life. The duality of the name fits a basilisk. It could either kill or protect.”

“ *How do you feel about the human sounds,* ‘Ouroboros’?” Harry explains what the name means.

“ *I like them. A good name.”*

And like that, Harry and Hermione become friends with Ouroboros and Ron begrudgingly comes down with them during defense periods to self-study the subject and talk to the snake and feed it wild boars that Kreacher mails Harry in lunch boxes that are bigger on the inside. Kreacher takes great glee in the knowledge that Harry has befriended a dark beast. He can also read because he is a Black Elf and they are Qualified To Do Anything for the House.

Harry's hand heals in about a week thanks to Dittany and low exposure and his tremors from the cruciatus finally end. "You were lucky," Pomfrey tells him. Harry can't imagine how he was lucky to

have gone through any of this. Ouroboros agrees and offers to eat Pomfrey. Harry declines.

Harry, Hermione and Ron manage to study alone for eleven days before Ginny begs Harry to help more students learn defense now that they have no official professor. Harry begins instructing a few Gryffindors outside near the great hall after dinner, and soon a few people from other houses join in, and then, on day eighteen of no classes, it seems the whole school shows up. Between Quidditch practice, trying to paint, and defense, it's all quite overwhelming for Harry.

Feeling slightly in over his head, Harry begins delegating leadership of certain spells to those who have mastered them. Once you learn a spell, he decides, you must come to him, Hermione or Ginny to learn how to teach it. Then you announce yourself as a SME (spell matter expert) for the spell you know, and anyone trying to learn can ask you for help. Harry and Hermione and Luna work together to create a charmed board and people can put themselves on the board saying, for example, “Diggory. Protego, Diffindo, and Impedimenta SME.”

Harry is still over-run and so he asks Tom for help. All it takes is a rushed, “I’m trying to teach defense but there are so many of them and I really can’t do it all by myself with Hermione we need help, please –” and Tom says, “Say no more,” and *helps.*

Watching Tom patiently teach spell after spell to students should not be so attractive, but it is. Tom flits from supporter to audience member to professor to coach seamlessly and helps every child master spells in styles that work for them.

Harry says after one session, “You’d make a great teacher.”

Tom smiles brilliantly. “You really think so?”

“I do.”

Harry, Ron, and Hermione still spend their open period visiting the basilisk, and every now and again, Harry invites Tom. He’s still mad, but Tom being honest and teaching students helps quite a bit.

Harry and Tom begin teaching the Patronus to fourth years and up on the thirtieth day of Umbridge’s absence. By the time the Aurors come and go and Dumbledore announces the reinstatement of a new defense professor, about half of the school students fourteen and older can produce some silvery mist. Ginny, Hermione, Luna, Cedric, and Draco Malfoy of all people can make a fully corporeal Patronus.

Draco pretends to hate coming to the defense sessions, but Harry watches him and notices the only time in the whole day Draco looks half-okay is during those classes.

Inter-house unity for the last thirty-four days is at an all-time high.

On day forty-five of Umbridge missing, Harry ends up back in the defense classroom. A woman with shockingly pink hair and looking shockingly young stands at the front of the classroom.

“I’m Auror Tonks,” she introduces herself, “The ministry has decided that from now on every Auror will have a one-year rotation as the Defense Professor. This will help you all have a standard curriculum and qualified professors and because we’ll all have a time limit on the post, the ministry thinks none of us will disappear like Umbridge. With that out of the way, let’s start practicing langlock. Can anyone tell me when you would use it?”

Harry likes her at once.

***

When it is almost wintertime and Harry has grown to love Tonks even more than he loved Remus as a professor, and when his little impromptu defense classes have been turned into a school-sanctioned elective nearly everyone is still taking, Dumbledore calls Harry to speak to him in his office.

Dumbledore takes off his gloves to reveal one hand blackened and crumbling. “I was foolish,” he says in the silence that follows in the wake of his reveal. “And now, I am dying.”

Harry cannot take his eyes from the hand. He wishes he was anywhere other than here. He and Dumbledore have a complicated relationship, certainly, but Harry hates that he will lose him all the same.

“I wish you weren’t.”

Dumbledore looks impossibly fond and almost cheerful. "Do not feel too bad for me. I am quite interested to see where I shall go after life. To the well-organized mind, death is but the next great adventure."

Harry can't help the small laugh that bubbles up. It comes out like a sob. "That is just like you."

"Indeed," Dumbledore says with twinkling eyes. The sparkle fades and he is again a dying man. "I did ask you here for a reason. I know it is unfair to ask this of you, but I will ask it all the same."

Feeling some trepidation, Harry asks, "What are you asking me to do?"

Dumbledore places one hand over his heart and bows his head. "Will you, Harry Potter, paint my portrait? I ask you humbly. I can think of no one better."

He has never painted a portrait of a magical person yet. It will be tricky to get the balance of magic and personality correct.

If Harry can't paint with enough of Dumbledore's magic and soul, the portrait will not take root and he will end up with a canvas full of paint but devoid of life.

Harry has only ever made a portrait once before and it was Dudley, a muggle he knew like the back of his own hand. Simple, charming Dudley, blundering through life and growing up with an inky core.

Harry looks into Dumbledore's tangled tapestry of a soul and wants nothing to do with it.

At first, Harry is going to say no.

But Harry remembers his father's cloak and Christmas presents and being eleven years old in a hospital bed with a grandfatherly man eating a Bertie Bott's Every Flavour Bean and saying, "Alas! Earwax."

Dumbledore may not have been a good man, but he tried in his own way to be good to Harry.

So Harry closes his eyes and says, honestly, “It would be my honor.”

Chapter End Notes

Because of course, even if he's good at defense, in the end, Harry is a Painter.

Next up, Dumbledore Interlude.

Please leave a kudos or comment so I know I am not writing into the void.

Albus Interlude

Chapter Summary

> Dang this fic is two years old now. Sorry about how long this took to get up. There is so much that happened in the life of Albus Dumbledore it was a bit of a struggle to write. But I did, and I hope you enjoy it.
>
> PSA:
>
> There is violence and homophobia in this chapter. Watch out and take care

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

To paint a soul is to lay layer upon layer of all the defining memories and qualities that make a person greater than the sum of their parts – and Dumbledore's tapestry is woven with shining threads and fraying threads from every decade of his life and the most complicated soul Harry has ever seen.

The first thread Harry begins to paint is when Albus is five years old.

Albus is characterized by incredible loneliness at this age. He is smart in a way that even his parents cannot understand. He comes home from his school in the sleepy town called Mould-on-the-Wold and tries to make sense of his experiences with his mother. His mother, a tired but handsome woman juggling a five-year-old, two-year-old, and one-year-old baby does her absolute best to give Dumbledore her full attention, but the little girl in her arms is crying and there's a toddler tugging on her leg.

"What did you say, love?" She asks as she shushes the baby in her arms and summons a cut-up banana for the toddler.

“I don’t understand why the other boys run to one end of the field and scream at each other and then run back every break. Why do they do that?”

“Well, it’s just boys being boys, innit?” She says, patting the toddler’s head and giving Albus an exhausted smile.

Albus says, frustrated, “I *know* that. But I don’t get it. And I’m a boy too, aren’t I?”

Kendra, his mother, clucks her tongue. “Of course you are, dearest. You’re just… a bit different than a lot of other boys. That’s not a bad thing, love.”

“But then *why* do other boys want to run around and scream all the time?”

“That’s just how they were built, Albus –”

Albus, five years old and wanting answers his mother cannot give him, raises his voice and shouts, “But *why?”*

Then the baby starts crying harder and his mother can no longer ignore her, and she starts saying, “Hush Ariana, you’re okay, Albus is done yelling,” and the toddler makes smiles at the baby and says, “Abe’s here, Ari,” and dissatisfied, Albus turns away from his family and makes his way to his corner of the room he shares with his little brother in their small home.

He frowns very seriously and tries to think of things other than how he cannot understand his classmates.

As he gets older, he learns his differences go beyond his dislike for running and screaming. He learns his letters much faster than his classmates. He gets along well with some girls in the town outside of lessons, but the school he attends only has boys and they all get along with each other.

When Albus is eight, he has been moved up a few grades and he can no longer speak to his parents about everything he wishes. He knows more math than his father and mother ever learned. He tries not to feel embarrassed about how little they know, but he still finds shame in himself when he tries to explain multiplication to his mother and she says, “Oh well, you were always the one good at numbers, Albus.”

His father says, “Once you know the calculation spells, arithmetic doesn’t matter so much, now does it?”

And that feels to Albus a bit like his father is saying it does not matter much that Albus is good at learning and that he should just be quiet about it. Which feels unfair and hurtful, though Albus never says so.

Albus happens to like knowing things and thinks his parents ought to learn more than they know because they know so little, and he would absolutely hate the same thing to happen to his little brother.

He patiently tries to teach geometry and negative numbers to Aberforth, but the five-year-old has no interest in any of it. He simply calls Albus, “Stuffy,” and sticks out his tongue, and scampers away. Aberforth is a regular boy, friendly with all of the neighborhood children and running from one end of the field to the other during breaks. He likes to find slugs and scream and Albus loves him but he does not like him all that much. More importantly, he does not *understand* him.

Still feeling intensely lonely, Albus turns one morning to Ariana who has bright golden hair and follows him around like a baby duckling whenever given the chance. Albus sometimes reads her a story goodnight but mostly avoids her because she is so little and she can shriek so *loudly*.

But this morning, he says, “Ari, want to learn something?”

Ariana looks up at him with the bright blue eyes they share and wavers for a moment before nodding vigorously.

“Alright then,” he says suspiciously. He, for the whole morning, tries to explain various things to her. Negative numbers do not stick, but geometry does.

“Quad-ri-latter-als have four sides, right?” She asks after their first lesson together with a brilliant grin.

Something settles in Albus’ chest when he says, “Yes Ari, that’s right, you got it.” It feels a lot like pride and relief. She's still young, but she’s a bit like him. She learns her letters quickly when Albus teaches her after his school days, and she even learns to read small books before she turns five.

He thinks she is still too much of a baby to be his friend, but maybe one day, when she’s his age and he’s twelve, they can speak together and he can teach her more and more things, and they can love their family but not understand them together.

Albus learns another way he is different from other boys the year he is nine. This, more than some of the other threads of Dumbledore’s tapestry, stands out as a *core* element of Dumbledore’s soul.

Albus is speaking with some of the boys in his school. They are all thirteen to fifteen because he keeps moving up classes. One boy, freckled and gangly, says, “I fancy Marissa,” and a few others murmur in agreement. Albus’ ears perk up. One other boy says, “She’s good-looking, alright, but I think Paige is the prettiest girl in the town.” The boys all laugh and the gangly boy from before whistles then shouts, “Paige is spoken for, Devon. I heard the butcher’s son already offered a dowry. You have no chance.”

Devon puffs up his chest and says, “You don’t know that. If I ever get rich, I’ll make her parents an offer they can’t refuse.”

The boys go on and on about all the people they fancy, “Margaret, Emily, Emma, Celeste,” and so on.

One of the boys comes over to Albus and lays a hand on his shoulder. “And what about you, little guy? You got a dick that works?”

“Think so, yeah,” Albus says, already used to their vulgar language. This, for the first time, is a conversation he understands.

“Yeah? Who do you fancy, then?”

Albus thinks it through. There’s an eleven-year-old in the class below who has sandy blonde hair and a sweet smile. He sometimes walks Albus home from school and he makes Albus laugh all the time. He may not be the smartest boy in the school, but he is the kindest and most lovely.

“Maybe William Baker?” Albus tries.

All at once, the room stills. It becomes cold and tense and Albus can see disgust rolling off the older boys in waves. His heart starts beating too quickly as he comes to an abrupt realization that the only people spoken about as being worthy to fancy were *girls* and that there must be something wrong with him having the same feelings of fancying about a *boy*.

Thinking fast he laughs loudly and yells, “Your faces! I was only joking. Imagine fancying a lad.”

There are relieved laughs all around.

“It has to be Louisa Johnson for me,” he says, landing on a girl he sometimes goes on walks with because she is calm and nice enough.

“Louisa Johnson,” a teen says, testing the word out. “She’s that twelve-year-old you sometimes hang around, yeah?”

Albus nods.

“Not bad looking, though a bit plain, I’d say. And nice joke, gibface. Didn’t know you had it in you.”

Albus gives a mock salute and goes home feeling shame and hatred at himself and at the world for making his first real conversation with some boys turn into something forced and fake.

He asks his father that night if there’s something wrong with fancying boys. His father, overworked and impulsive and *dumb at times,* but still more loving than anything else, pulls Albus into an embrace and says,

“No, Albus. Never think that. There will be people who will tell you that it’s an abomination but they’re only muggles. They think all this shite from a book they base their religions on but it means nothing, hear? Wizard-borns do not care one lick and neither should you.”

The day is remembered, ultimately, rather bitter-sweet.

At ten years old, the tapestry of Dumbledore’s soul turns dark.

The important fact is that Albus wasn’t there. He wasn’t there when Ariana, innocent and brilliant and growing up, was performing underage magic. Ariana is so magical and she learns in a very natural way how to get animals to talk to her. It’s powerful magic and instinctive and it fits her nature very well. She talks to the deers and the birds and they love her because of course they do.

She must have been doing something like that when the muggle children saw her. She was probably talking to a deer, maybe making a little sprout grow for it to nibble on. Albus does not know, exactly. He wasn’t there.

But the muggles became scared and jealous and Albus learns another way he does not understand other boys. Albus has been scared and jealous before, but in the same way he never has the impulse to run from one end of the field to the other and scream, he does not understand how *how* these muggle boys could decide to do what they must have done.

He was not there and he did not hear exactly what was said, did not see exactly what they did, but he saw Ariana’s broken body, after.

Her clothes were torn and mud-covered. Her blonde hair smelled of copper and was matted in blood. Her brilliant, sparkling blue eyes

turned dull, and tear tracks marked both cheeks.

It was Aberforth who found her and at just seven years old, he carried his six-year-old sister all the way back home, crying the whole way.

Albus is studying in his and Aberforth's bedroom when the door bursts open to Aberforth sobbing and traumatized.

At first, he does not know what is going on. He pulls Aberforth into a clumsy hug, they've never been close, and sinks down to the floor with his little brother. He brushes back a bit of Aberforth's hair in the way their mother does sometimes, and says in a gentle voice, "What's going on, Aberforth?"

Aberforth is shaking terribly and clinging to Albus' robes with all his might. "Ari-Ariana is – is – is –"

With a sinking feeling and a ringing in his ears, Albus stands and gently deposits Aberforth on a bed. Whether it was his own bed or Aberforth's, Albus does not know. Numbly, Albus walks out of the room and into the kitchen.

Ariana, looking impossibly broken and impossibly small, is curled up on the table. Their mother is furiously whispering every healing spelling she knows. Flesh is knitting before Albus' eyes but there still seems to be far too much blood.

Albus' mother closes her eyes, takes a deep breath, and then shouts, "Expecto Patronum." A silver horse bursts out and she yells, "Percival, I need you. Ariana's been – been hurt. Badly. I need you home."

Albus feels as though his mouth is stuffed with cotton. He takes a step forward, although what he can do, he doesn't know.

His mother looks up and all she says is, "Out."

Albus flinches, looks again at Ariana with her vacant stare at the ceiling, and returns to his room. He feels out of his body that night when he rocks Aberforth to sleep, and out of his body when his father returns home and he can hear shouting through the walls. He thinks he remembers his father coming into his bedroom and kissing both him and Aberforth and their foreheads, and then there's a sort of numbness that colors everything.

The muggle boys that hurt Ariana are dead within the week. His father is sent to Azkaban by the end of a fortnight. Three weeks after the attack money is tight, Aberforth is beating up his classmates with his fists, and Ariana… Ariana is gone.

She's not dead, but on the days he can find himself, Albus sometimes wishes she was. Gone is the little girl who used to follow him around like a duckling and who wanted to learn all he could teach her. Gone is the little girl who spoke to deer and who was beginning to write short stories at just six.

In her place is a phantom who wears his sister's face. She is a vacant creature, listless and never present. Her magic before was never violent but now it is violently protective. Once, when Albus comes and tries to teach her something to make her feel better, she pins him against a wall without even blinking. Their mother is bruised daily from trying to get Ariana to eat. Aberforth fares a bit better but he too grows scars from trying to take care of his little sister.

She is barely alive at all. There are days when she seems half-herself, days where she will smile and almost work up the courage to speak,

but they are few and far between. Albus spends the year leading up to Hogwarts focusing on her and seeing if she will get better. For a while, on every good day, he thinks she is making progress. He thinks that maybe the good day will hold and she will be a sadder version of who she might have been, but she will still be the sister he grew to like and not only love.

But the good days never hold. After a while, every good day leaves Albus feeling sickened. That feeling spreads as he comes to term with the fact that his stupid, impulsive father killed muggle children and abandoned his children and wife. His father is a felon, his mother is killing herself trying to care for her daughter, and Ariana is dead in every way but in body.

His mother moves them from Mould-on-the-Wold to the wizarding village called Godric's Hollow. Their new home is small and Ariana is hidden from the world.

Albus leaves for Hogwarts with shame and disgust filling every fiber of his being, still painfully lonely.

When the hat is placed on his head, it considers where to put him.

"Hmmm," a voice says in Albus' ears. "You have plenty of ambition, don't you? But a terrible thirst for knowledge. And you want to be brave."

"I'm not brave," Albus says. He can hardly stand to look at his sister. He pretends to fancy girls. He's rarely honest when his mother asks how he is.

"Maybe so. But you want to be. And what you have is a need for

courage."

"Courage?"

"Strength in the face of pain and grief. You're going to need plenty of that. Better be GRYFFINDOR."

His years at Hogwarts teach Albus that he is smart, that he is powerful, and that he is going to be able to move away from his sad family and become something *greater*. He will shed the scars that litter his past to create a future where no one needs to suffer the way he has suffered.

Hogwarts becomes his home and he loves the castle more fiercely than anywhere else on earth.

He begs his head of house to let him stay in the school over the summer that first year, dreading returning to his new and small home haunted by the demon that took over his sister.

His head of house gives him a sad smile and refuses.

So after a year of magic and ease and always enough to eat he returns to a home full of shadows. His mother and brother are painted with bruises and Ariana stares vacantly at the walls. Albus spends the whole summer in his room studying. He wants to be different than his family – he wants to go far away and be something, something great.

The beginning of the school year can't come fast enough, and when he returns he is already well ahead of all his peers. When they spent their summers playing and skiving off revisions, he'd been working.

It becomes a cycle: he learns during the schoolyear, makes friends, impresses his teachers, begs to stay, and returns home in the summer to Godric's Hollow sullen and angry. He begins hearing rumours that Ariana is being kept captive in their home from the neighbors. He supposes it's because she is rarely seen.

From afar, she could be just another pre-teen, pretty hair and red cheeks. Aberforth gets better every year with her, and sometimes when the two of them are sitting head to head, she'll say something and smile a bit and a mirage forms of a grinning girl with gentle magic and fierce intelligence.

But she snaps at the oddest moments and the mirage reveals only burning sand and a thirst for water that will never flow.

Over the summer, Aberforth looks at the way Albus avoids Ariana and decides that he hates his older brother.

"You're going to abandon us," Aberforth says to Albus, "You're going to leave one day and you're not going to miss us. That's the kind of person you are."

He is not wrong so all Dumbledore can say is, "I do love all of you."

Aberforth says, "Your love isn't worth very much then, is it?"

In Albus' fourth year, Aberforth comes to Hogwarts and is sorted Hufflepuff. Could Albus be blamed from distancing himself from sullen Aberforth when he came to Hogwarts, robes black and yellow -- mocking his older brother for his abandoned loyalty? Albus tries not to blame Aberforth for never trying to understand his older brother.

They only grow apart as they grow older.

Three years later, Ariana kills their mother and Albus finds himself grieving and shouldering the responsibility for a family that does not want him. He is only eighteen.

***

“You’re that Dumbledore, aren’t you? The talented orphan?” A blonde boy calls out one night when Albus is walking in Godric’s Hollow with his head down.

Albus looks at the boy. He’s tall and muscled, and his eyes are full of interest and intensity. Grindelwald, Albus remembers. Gellert. The boy who was expelled from Durmstrang, the neighbors gossiped. He came here to live with his aunt.

Albus says, evenly, “You’re Bagshot’s charity case, aren’t you? The expelled student?”

Gellert’s eyes flash and Albus watches with intrigue to see if the boy will snap, he’s supposedly quite violent, but instead, his lips turn up in a smirk. He places one hand over his heart and gives a mock bow.

“At your service.”

Albus finds his own lips quirking up into a smile. “Pleasure.”

Gellert walks forward and takes Albus’ hand. He lifts it to his lips and

stares at Albus with dark eyes. “Oh no, the pleasure is all mine.”

Albus feels his heartbeat quicken. He clears his throat and says, “I must be going on,” and Gellert releases Albus’ hand.

“Well go on then,” Gellert says, “But grab drinks with me? Tomorrow night?”

Albus should say no. Between the work he needs to do, managing another of Ariana’s fits, and trying to convince Aberforth to stay away from Ariana because she *killed their mother* he hasn’t the time. He’d been planning to travel the world with his friend Doge, but he’s had to put his whole life on hold. And maybe that’s why Albus says, “Yes, tomorrow then. You know where I live?”

And Gellert says, “Of course, not like this hovel of a town is big. I’ll pick you up.”

Albus says, “See you then.”

It is insanity. That is all it can be. Gellert is far from harmless and Albus shouldn’t get distracted. But he is just eighteen and he is sick of putting his life on hold.

He goes out to drink with Gellert. As they talk, Gellert puts one hand on Albus’ knee. Albus does not move the hand away and keeps drinking and talking.

Gellert explains things over the night, things about the hallows, and Albus says, “Legends, aren’t they?”

Gellert moves the hand on Albus' knee to cup his face, brushing over his thigh, chest, and neck on the journey.

"To the muggles, a dragon is a legend. To them, a fairy belongs in a storybook. But you and me, we're wizards, aren't we? Albus, you of all people should know nothing in magic is confined as a story only."

Albus swallows. In the darkness of the pub, Gellert's sea-colored eyes are more luminous than usual and Albus can't look away. Gellert moves his face toward Albus and when Albus does not move, Gellert leans in and kisses him.

Albus' first kiss tastes like firewhisky.

***

Two months of obsession. Albus gets used to the kisses, the reckless plans for the future, the hands on his back, the bites on his thighs, the fingers in his mouth.

Gellert is hungry and Albus wants to be *consumed.*

They search for the hallows. They talk of conquering death. They plan to fix the world.

"The muggles, they're the root of the disease spreading through our world. They're the problem and they'd be powerless to stop us," Gellert says. "They're not really human, you see. They're like rats and cockroaches. The world surely does not benefit from vermin."

In bed next to Gellert, Albus ends up saying, “They killed my sister.”

“But I’ve seen her. She seems alive to me.”

“She used to be… sane. Whoever is left, that’s not my sister.” As Albus says the word, he can’t tell if he’s sad or angry.

Gellert says, “That’s what muggles do. They destroy. But you and me, we can create. We will lead a revolution and the muggles will be fettered, never to do harm again.”

There’s a piece of Albus that feels maybe that would be wrong – that surely not all muggles deserve subservience. But it would be for the greater good, wouldn’t it? Wizards are so much more advanced and muggles are violent. No other little girl with stars in her eyes would ever have to be terrorized for being herself. That’s the kind of world Albus wants to create.

“It will be for the greater good,” Albus says.

Gellert’s eyes twinkle, “For the greater good,” he affirms

“When do we start?”

Gellert pushes himself up and drapes his body over Albus, caging Albus in with both arms. He grins mischievously and says, “You, my love, can start by spreading your legs again for me.”

***

Gellert and Albus make plans to leave Godric's Hollow to find the hallows, and Albus is ready to go and meet his destiny.

Gellert and Albus are speaking in the house of where they will go forth when Aberforth barges into the room and shouts, "What exactly is your plan here? I'm not – I'm not old enough yet to take care of Ariana. But she needs me and if you leave, we'll be taken along won't we? She can't - she can barely handle being *here.* You can't."

Albus says, cooly, "As both of your guardians, you'll find that I can."

Aberforth raises his wand, which surprises Albus. "You disgust me," he spits.

Albus raises his own wand, and next to him, Gellert laughs.

"I promise you, Aberforth, Ariana will be well-cared for once Gellert and I win this revolution. No one will ever have to be hurt like Ariana was ever again. It will be worth it, you'll see."

Aberforth says, "And what about until you win? What if you don't win? What if you do and the world is worse off for it? You're not God, neither of you."

"Aberforth, please, trust me."

"I don't."

As the conversation goes on and on, Albus can sense Gellert getting more and more impatient beside him.

“Come now little Dumbledore, leave well enough alone,” Gellert says after a few more minutes.

“Fuck off,” Aberforth shouts.

“You asked for this,” Gellert says, eyes flashing. He rolls up his sleeves and then grasps his wand and in one practiced motion, casts the cruciatus. Red light shoots out from his wand and hits Aberforth straight in the chest. Albus had always known Gellert was violent but this -- this shocks him.

It takes Albus approximately twenty seconds too long to realize what has happened, and once he does, he casts a disarming spell at Gellert and steps in front of Aberforth.

“Don’t touch him,” he commands.

He sees betrayal in Gellert’s eyes. “You would choose him over me?” Gellert asks.

All at once, several things slot into place in Albus’ mind. Gellert is a madman and irrevocably power hungry. Aberforth is his little brother. And for all that Albus does not understand his brother, he does love him. He does not love Gellert nearly as much.

“My little brother? Yeah, I would. Every time.”

The duel starts off almost teasing, with disarming spells and gentle curses. Albus and Gellert are lovers, afterall. Who casts the first head-severing charm, Albus does not know. It could have been Gellert. It could have been Aberforth. It could have been him.

But adolescent Aberforth and his older brother find themselves in a deathly battle with Gellert as spells fly and furniture is torn to shreds.

In the chaos, none of them notice as Ariana makes her way down the stairs. But they all notice when there is a thud and as all three of them turn their heads, they see Ariana broken on the floor, dead.

Albus and Aberforth rush to her side. Gellert flees.

Albus relives the moment in his head for weeks, months, years, for decades. He relives the moment nearly every night in his dreams. He does not know who cast the spell that killed her.

It could have been him.

And even if he didn't cast the curse, wasn't it all his fault anyway?

He allows Aberforth to break his nose at the funeral for their little sister. "This is your fault," Aberforth says. "She's dead because of you."

Albus says, softly, "She is."

He visits her grave daily for the rest of the year and can't help but wonder if part of the guilt he feels is also because there's a piece of him that feels relieved she's gone now and can never take Aberforth with her. Because even if Aberforth hates him, Albus does not have to hate him back. So he refuses to hate his little brother and works on doing his best to love him instead, even if it hurts.

He'd planned to be great, but Albus finds himself fearing what he is capable of. He refuses to be anyone that can hurt another.

He goes into teaching Transfiguration and imagines a quiet life for himself. He is by no means perfect, he is suspicious of Slytherins perhaps more than he should be because of Gellert. He dislikes a student, Tom Riddle, far more than he should because he is so reminded of Gellert. But he becomes content and he sees a simple future where he helps others on the path to greatness without ever walking it himself.

Gellert meanwhile, in those decades Albus finds safety and comfort teaching in Hogwarts, becomes a Dark Lord and kills hundreds of thousands. That they ever shared a bed leads Albus to be disgusted with himself.

He is asked, often, to try and defeat Gellert. Not because the wizards know their history, but because Albus holds the record as the most talented student to ever grace the walls of Hogwarts. He declines and declines until he can no longer.

Forty-six years after Ariana's death, Albus faces Gellert once more, and this time he does his best to have courage and lets his power flow. He forces Gellert to his knees and disarms him and in so doing, finds himself thrust into greatness.

Gellert says, when the battle is over and he is being dragged away,

“Remember how this feels. This is what it feels like when you are a coward and choose the wrong side over me.”

Albus says, “I disagree. This, Gellert, is how it feels when I choose the greater good over *you*.”

From that moment on, Albus is more than just a professor. He becomes a general, a hero, and the most important figure in the wizarding world in an enduring way. He becomes the headmaster, the mugwump, and a central figure in wizarding Great Britain. Albus reminds himself that power corrupts and focuses on being as humorous and loving as he can be. When Tom Riddle becomes Voldemort and a second war begins, Albus does his best to protect his students.

He also looks for students that he can cultivate to fight. They will fight for themselves and their families and to make the world better. They fight for a brighter future.

Harry paints the need for a better tomorrow and the blue-coloured sorrow for all the children and teens Albus leads to their deaths in the search for the greater good.

In the room Harry painted for this portrait, one with plush ottomans and a small ever-flowing waterfall, Harry continues to paint Albus' soul. He paints Dumbledore with two left hands so that the portrait will never feel the pain of the curse in Dumbledore’s right hand. Harry can’t help but think that Dumbledore will love that small detail of eccentricity. It will certainly confuse historians.

Harry keeps painting the many threads that build the soul of this great tapestry weaver.

Harry learns of the prophecy and the role Snape played in the death of his parents.

Harry sees that Dumbledore truly cares for him. He sees Dumbledore holding his baby self after Voldemort's attack and making faces even as his heart is breaking, trying to get little Harry to laugh. And Harry does, and Dumbledore's heart fills and he wishes above everything that Harry will get to live in peace and that the prophecy has been fulfilled. But he brushes back a lock of Harry's dark hair and sees the lightning bolt scar. His heart sinks as he thinks, "Must this boy die too?" Albus wishes it were not so, too many children have died already.

But he must. Harry, this beautiful little boy who grows up to be so kind and loving, must die. Prophecies and wars are cruel.

Little Harry is eleven and standing in front of the mirror night after night, staring at his parents and losing himself to the fantasy of what can never be.

Albus warns him off losing himself to the mirror's pull, hoping that Harry will have many happy years of childhood before he needs to be called on to fight and… pass on.

And little Harry is asking him with so much sincerity what he, what *Albus* sees.

What does Albus see?

There is so much. He sees his mother, plump and healthy. He sees his father, proud and smiling. Aberforth, with his arms crossed and glaring but love coming out of every pore.

He sees Ariana. The woman in the mirror was never terrorized by muggles and never lost her father. There's gentle magic all around her because she was always going to be powerful, his little sister. There are flowers blooming from her fingertips and wound in her golden hair and her eyes are blue and open. He can tell in the smile she's sending his way, a knowing one full of private jokes, that they have spent years together loving their family but not understanding them together. He can tell that they often have debates late into the night and one else can keep up. There's banter between them and no tragedy. In the real world, she died at just fourteen and Albus has mourned her for longer than he knew her. But in the mirror, she's grown up and Albus can tell that they have been best friends for decades. He can almost hear her saying in a sweet yet insistent tone, "Albus, Albus, I know you're busy but could you come and check over this research…" and --- yes, there's Harry still looking at him.

Albus tears his eyes away from the mirror. "I? I see myself holding a pair of thick woolen socks."

Chapter End Notes

I know that Albus is a divisive figure and trying to characterize anyone with so many facets is challenging. Please be gentle if you feel I have not done him the way you would, and please know I tried my absolute best to do him justice.

Thank you for reading and please do not hesitate to leave a kudos or comment even if I am writing into the void.

Catch you all next time!

Draco

Chapter Summary

I know it's a fast update compared to my usual update schedule but I'm feeling motivated. I might even get the next chapter to you by the end of the weekend but I don't want to promise anything in case I'm wrong.'

PSA: There is mind manipulation in this chapter. Watch out and take care

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Powerful. Hateful. Hated…. Ugly.

When the portrait is finished, Harry spends a long moment watching the canvas. This is the moment of truth: either he has painted enough soul into his work and Dumbledore's portrait will take root and live on forever, or there is not enough soul and the figure he painted of Dumbledore will melt away, never to be seen again.

A finger on one of the portrait's left hands twitches. The same is repeated on the second left hand. Harry breathes out a sigh of relief.

"Right then, that's your portrait."

At the same time, both the painting of Dumbledore and the living Dumbledore say, "Thank you, Harry." Then they both shake themselves and say, "That'll take some getting used to, won't it. No, no, no, you speak first other me."

Harry has reached his absolute limit of looking at Dumbledore and being around Dumbledore and he realizes abruptly that he needs to leave this office *immediately*. In some ways, he thinks he ought to have left before he got sucked in to making the portrait in the first place.

"I'm gonna go now," he finds himself saying, "And er – thanks for the heads up. About me needing to die and all. I'll er… take that under advisement." And with that, Harry flees the room and ignores the chorusing voices of the very lonely and absurdly brilliant (though perhaps slightly misguided) man (men?) behind him.

It's a hard thing to reconcile , Harry thinks. *Someone who has loved me all of my life also wants me to walk to my death. What am I supposed to do with that? Where do I even start?*

Harry does not want to begin to start. He also does not want to feel anything but anger for Dumbledore, but after getting to know him so deeply, he cannot muster any anger for the man. He has a sort of sad-tinged love for the man, and that bothers Harry too.

As Harry is walking, he sees Draco walk by an otherwise deserted passageway.

"Draco," Harry calls, "Wotcher." Harry feels rather out of his body and everything seems slightly absurd, but even so, he could swear that Draco is wearing a skirt.

Draco's face drains of color. "I'm not Draco," he says.

Harry squints and realizes abruptly that Draco is not only wearing a skirt but also is rather short with long hair. He also has a different face and looks about eleven. Harry asks, "Draco, why are you wearing the skin of a little girl?"

Draco shakes his head and says, “First of all, Potter, that is such a disturbing way to ask the question. And secondly, I am not Draco Malfoy. I’m just a Slytherin little girl.”

“No,” Harry says looking more at the soul of the person in front of him than the skin, “You’re definitely Draco. Polyjuice was it? Why? I didn’t think you disliked being a man, but if you do, I’m sure Snape can help with that…”

Draco snaps, “I”m not uncomfortable with being a man!”

“Ah,” Harry says, “So you are Draco.”

“No!” Draco says.

“I won't judge you,” Harry says. “I’ve had a long day and I really couldn’t care if you feel more comfortable in the body of a girl. You are just acting weird and have been for a while. Are you okay?”

Draco laughs a bit hysterically. “No, Potter, I am not okay. I haven’t been okay in a long time and there’s nothing you can do so piss off, will you?”

“I can help,” Harry insists. “I’m good at helping.”

“You actually can’t help.”

“If this is about Voldemort –” Draco flinches, “I can do my best to get

you away from him. I mean it."

Draco's eyes sharpen and he says, "You won't be able to help anything at all unless you kill him."

"I don't want to kill him," Harry confesses. "Maybe there's another way."

"There is no other way," Draco says, darkly. "Trust me on that one if nothing else."

Harry feels his senses slowly returning and he says, "Draco, you never answered my question. *Why did you use polyjuice to dress up as a little girl?"*

Draco closes his eyes and breathes out. "You know, if He didn't have my parents, I think I'd like to fight for you. But He does." Draco opens his eyes and walks toward Harry. As he walks, the Polyjuice wears off and tall and angled, Draco returns to his true form.

"We can –"

"I'm sorry, Harry," Draco says pulling Harry into a tight hug. "I'm so sorry."

Harry says, "It's alright Draco, I understand."

Draco whispers, angrily, "I think you don't. *Obliviate.* "

***

Harry supposes that painting Dumbledore must have taken more out of him than he realized because he ends up hanging out with Ouroboros and he can't quite recall how he got to the chamber of secrets. He has a blank spot between leaving Dumbledore's office and then speaking with Ouroboros. When he starts to feel more awake, he's already talking.

"His sister died and that kind of messed him up for the rest of his life, I think."

"Didn't you say your Aunt's sister died as well?" The basilisk asks.

"Yeah, and Aunt Petunia was really messed up about it for a while."

"But she is doing better now, yes? I think that there may be reasons for your head wizard to be the way he is, but reasons are not excuses."

"That's awfully wise," Harry says.

"Yes, Salazar always thought he was wise and with time, I began to see that part of him as well."

"Weird to think I'm getting advice that a snake got from a man who's been dead for millennia."

“Magic is weird.” Ouroboros agrees, *“Shall I eat your head wizard who wants you to die?”*

Harry declines.

“Pity.”

***

There’s never one monumental when Harry suddenly decides Tom is welcome in his life again, not like how it was back when Tom was still in the diary and Harry ran toward him after hiding from him for weeks.

Instead, it’s a gradual progression. Harry starts talking to Tom more during the extra defense lessons. He starts leaning his head against Tom’s shoulder when they visit Ouroborous together. Harry starts to invite Tom to places and debates with him and laughs with him and is endlessly charming.

It’s a slow amount of progress, but it is progress, and before winter break, Harry kisses him again, and Tom knows that they’re going to be okay.

“I think that’s what healthy love is,” Harry says when he’s tucked into Tom, lying on the small bed in Tom’s room. “It isn’t easy always, but it’s knowing your life will always be better with the person beside you than it would be without them.”

Tom noses against Harry’s neck and breathes in his artist’s scent. “My life is always better with you,” he says in a rumbling kind of tone, “I

doubt I ever lived before you."

"Just as long as I'm not the only person you care about," Harry says, sounding very much like Hermione, "You need other people too."

"I have them," Tom says, thinking of Beatrice and Cedric and all his beloved Hufflepuffs. "And I still care for you the most."

"Well, that's alright then," Harry decides. He kisses Tom once on the lips and turns over, ready to fall asleep. Tom slides a hand over Harry's chest and pulls the darling boy close to him, and finds himself drifting off contently.

Harry wakes screaming and hyperventilating and Tom jumps out of bed like he's about to be murdered before he sees the problem. Tom collects himself and kneels before Harry and says, "Breathe, just breathe with me, my love. That's it, good boy, breathe for me now."

When Harry is half-coherent he explains that Arthur Weasley is hurt and has been bitten by a snake and Tom springs into action.

In a matter of seconds his Bowerbird Patronus is off to inform Dumbledore, Tom has gotten both him and Harry dressed, he's conjured a second Patronus to collect all the Weasleys, and he and Harry are already out the door.

By the end of five minutes, all the Weasleys, Dumbledore, and Tom are in a waiting room outside of St. Mungo's and Arthur is inside in critical condition.

By the end of fifteen minutes, Sirius and Molly arrive and while Molly

tends to her traumatized children, Sirius tends to his.

Harry gazes off into space and seems like he is far from his body.

“Harry, kid,” Sirius says, snapping his fingers. “Harry! Hey, want to know something surprising?”

Tom says, “What, Sirius?" when it becomes clear Harry will not answer.

“I’m two days sober. Two whole days. It’s a new record.”

It’s a laughable thing to congratulate so Tom refuses, but this does seem to catch Harry’s attention.

“Your soul is different now,” Harry says.

“What do you mean?”

“You were a clock before. But now you’re more like a sundial. What happened to you yesterday casts a shadow that separates your future from your past. You’ve changed, Sirius.”

“I hope so,” Sirius says. “I saw you try to smoke last time you were at Grimmauld and I thought I needed to quit before you came home for winter break. I don’t want to model bad shit. I’m trying.”

“Thank you then, for trying. For caring about us.” Harry says.

Sirius gives Harry and Tom a lopsided smile. “Always.”

***

Dumbledore ends up sending everyone home at the end of the night. “Arthur is still in poor shape, but he’ll pull through.”

Throughout the break, the Weasleys plus Harry trek over to St. Mungo's. It takes longer than Harry would like, but Arthur recovers.

Harry, when he is not checking on Arthur, is visited at Grimmauld by the headmaster. Dumbledore pulls Harry into the library.

“How did you know Arthur was attacked?” He asks.

“For the same reason I need to die, I suspect. Voldemort left a bit of himself behind in me that night, didn’t he?”

“A bit of soul, yes. Terrible magic.”

Harry can’t tell if Dumbledore knows or does not know that Tom used to be a bit of Voldemort's discarded soul in the same way Harry’s scar happens to be, so Harry keeps quiet about it.

“Seems like an awful thing to do to your soul,” Harry says instead.

“Yes,” Dumbledore confirms. “Just so. Because of your… connection to Voldemort, it may be wise to teach you Occlumency. Typically I would ask Snape to be in charge of your instruction, but after you saw my soul laid bare, I think it only fair I help you protect your mind.”

“Occlumency is a mind protection magic?”

“It can keep people from seeing your thoughts which they would do through magic called Legilimency. Voldemort is quite skilled at Legilimency, as am I.”

“Okay,” Harry says, “How do we begin?” He misses the mind stones and the security they brought to him knowing his mind was protected.

If Harry had not seen into Dumbledore’s soul, perhaps learning Occlumency over just two weeks would have been impossible. But Harry had seen into Dumbledore’s soul and not only was the man an excellent teacher, but Harry could also remember how Dumbledore felt when he was practicing mind magic and then try to synthesize his own version of a mental palace.

He recalls Dumbledore saying, “To the well-organized mind, death is but the next adventure,” or something, and organizes his mind rather like an adventure story book. There are fairies and castles and trees and winding roads and dragons and everything means something to *him* but it would look rather disorganized and whimsical tale to anyone else.

At the end of the winter holidays, Dumbledore tells Harry, “I have nothing left to teach you on this matter.”

“You could teach me some transfiguration,” Harry suggest cheekily. "If you wanted to teach me a different matter."

Dumbledore's eyes twinkle, "And steal that joy from Minerva? I would sooner clean out Fawke's latrine with my tongue."

***

The return to Hogwarts is pretty seamless. Tonks is by far the best Defense Professor Ginny's ever had. Draco's being weird and looks half-dead, but Ginny's used to that by now.

She's doing incredibly in all her classes and she can't help but think a lot of that is because of Harry and Tom's extra defense lessons. She's the youngest person on the leadership team for the club and she's taught her bat-bogey hex to a fair number of people in older years.

"At this rate," Ron says to her during one session, "You'll make prefect next year."

"It'll be a near-perfect record then, all of us minus Charlie and the twins."

Ron ruffles her hair which is rude and says, "Ickle Ginnykins is growing up so well."

"Oh shove off, you great oaf."

"I refuse," Ron says. "I will never shove off. You're stuck with me forever."

“Tragic,” Ginny deadpans.

“For me, absolutely. Anyhoo, love you, Gin,” Ron says with an annoying grin.

“Love you too, ickle Ronnikins.”

“Oi!”

Before she knows it, the year is near over. Dean keeps making moves on Ginny and once, when Draco is in full view, she lets Dean kiss her. Draco makes a face like his mother’s died and then glares at Dean with *malice* and that makes Ginny feel powerful. She likes in a weird way that she can bother him and hurt him and then she is horrified at herself.

She friend-zones Dean and tries to block out how she kissed someone, used someone, just to get back at a boy she never properly dated.

Draco it seems does not forget and corners Ginny in late spring in an alcove. “Why’d you let him do it, huh? Why’d you let Thomas stick his fucking tongue down your throat?”

“Well it’s not like you were going to do that for me, were you?” Ginny spits, “Do I need your permission to date people now?”

Draco says, “Maybe if you’re going to go for guys like Thomas!”

“Should I just get your permission for everything, then? Can I get your

leave, your majesty, to get away from you?" Ginny asks, making moves to leave. Draco catches her wrist.

"Wait," he says, "Just wait. I'm sorry, okay? I'm sorry."

Ginny pulls her wrist free. "I forgive you," she says, and then she walks out of the alcove.

She assumes that is the end of everything, but it isn't. Draco keeps looking at her and staring at her every time she's in full view.

A few days before the end of term, he drags her into an abandoned classroom, pale and shaking.

"Draco, what's wrong?"

"I didn't want to, you have understand me, but I had to. He'd kill me if I didn't and kill my mother first and make me watch."

Ginny's heart is beating a thousand miles per minute. The sun is setting and a dark orange sky is visible outside the window. "Draco," she says hesitantly, "What have you done?"

His voice is full of horror, "Deatheaters, Ginny. I let Deatheaters into Hogwarts."

Chapter End Notes

Oh dang.... was that a cliffhanger? I never do that!

Also in chapter 17 right around winter hols Sirius has a soul

desribed as a clock: (T-minus 730, and counting) the clock was counting down the days until Sirius would be able to begin the steps to fix himself, two years later. It's the trying that changes souls and Sirius was able to change his.

Please leave a kudos or comment so I know the void I am writing to is friendly.

Frost

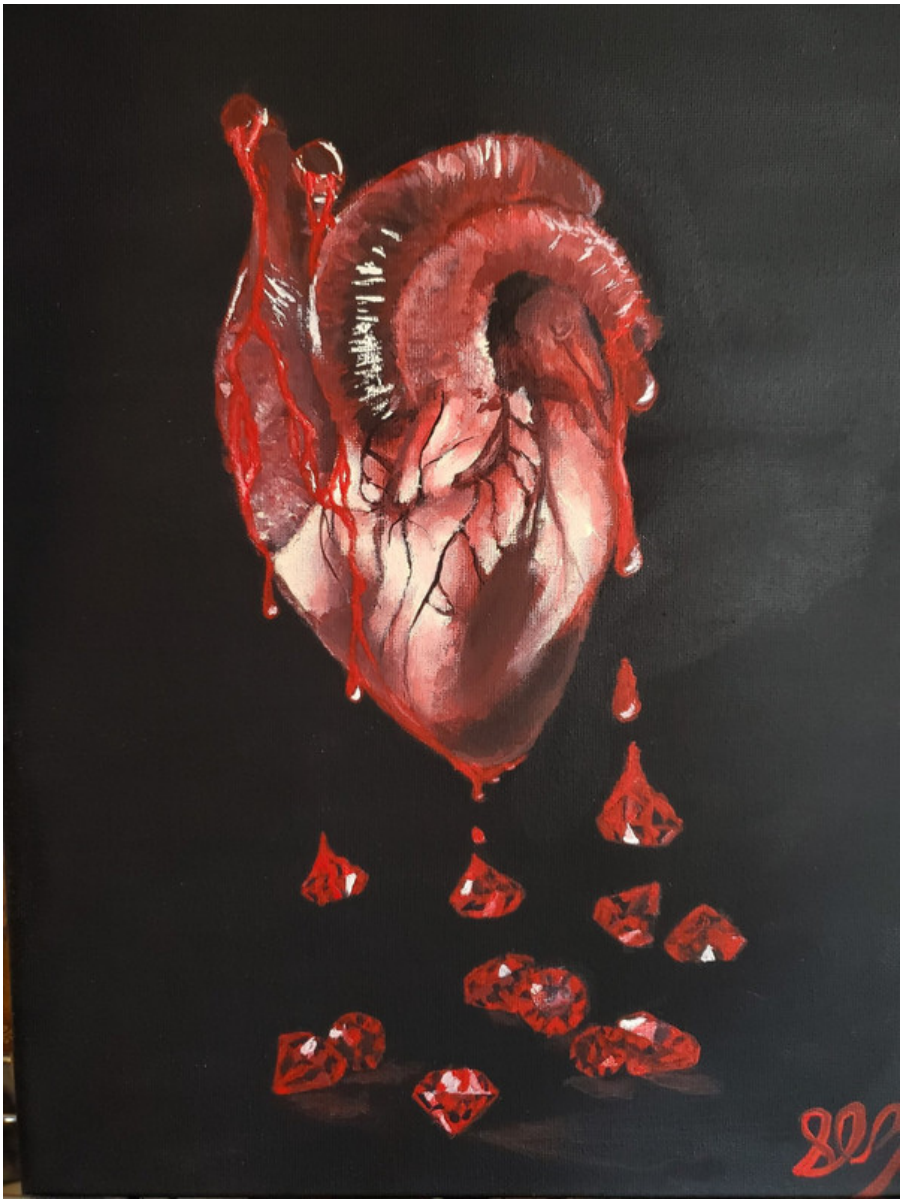
Chapter Summary

Aaaand I'm back. I'm on a ducking roll.

I kind of anticipate finishing the whole fic by August 14th, but we'll see. We are coming to the end, ladles and jellyspoons. Thanks for being here with me!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes



This incredible painting of a heart dripping rubies based on an earlier chapter is made by AO3's very own, incredibly talented, HoneyLetsHaveUhWizardsDuel. To check out the original twitter post, click here. This is so unbelievably phenomenal and frankly looks even cooler than I possibly could have ever imagined. And now, back to the chapter.

But with almost fifteen years by your side, it's clear that apathy was never an option. The two of us were always destined for either love or hatred.

" *Death Eaters?* Merlin."

Draco's face is pinched and the sun is almost gone from the sky as darkness rolls in. "You need to run, Ginny. If you go now, you'll be okay."

"Run? Draco, you know me better than that."

Draco shakes his head. "Please, Ginny. You're just fourteen. You need to run. I – I can't protect you if you don't. Please run, *please*. For me."

Ginny swallows. "I have never once asked you to protect me," she says, and recalls the time she was sent a toilet seat by her older brothers when she was missing them terribly, "Expecto Patronum." A gorgeous silver stalion springs forth from her wand. "Go to Harry and tell him, 'Death Eaters are in the castle.'"

Draco looks at her with a pained expression. "So there's nothing I can do. You're going to stay and fight, then? "

Ginny tosses her hair behind her back, "Of course. I'm a Gryffindor, aren't I?"

Draco releases a dry chuckle, “That you are. A goddamn Gryffindor.” He bites his lip and then says, seriously, “Stay safe tonight, Gin.”

Ginny leans forward and goes on her tiptoes to kiss Draco on his cheek. “You too.”

With that out of the way, it’s time for her to fight.

***

Death Eaters in the castle. Harry feels his heartbeat slow and an unnatural calm wash over him. He thinks about the best way to protect all of the students in the school. If they leave their dorms without a warning of what is in the castle, there’s a chance they will be slaughtered.

He’s in Tom’s room when Ginny’s Patronus comes announcing danger and he and Tom are both on their feet immediately. “Tom, send a Patronus to Cedric telling him what’s going on. I’ve got Hermione and Ron.”

Tom nods and they both cast simultaneously. Quickly the Ceryneian Hind and Bowerbird take off shouting that the Death Eaters are coming. Harry squares his shoulders with a plan taking form in his mind. “Tom, I need you to go fight with the students.”

Tom says, “And I need you to come with me and stay behind me where I can keep you *safe.* ”

Harry says, “No, I need to do something else.”

Tom crowds Harry against the wall of the room and says, “What? What can you do? If you think for even one second I will let you go outside this room without me, when there are Death Eaters outside, you don’t know me at all.”

Harry pushes against Tom and glares up into his eyes. “If you think I’m some damsel in distress, then *you* don’t know *me* at all. I need you to trust me.”

“How can I?” Tom challenges, “I saved you earlier this year from a blood quill. And even if I did trust you to protect yourself, I don’t trust the Death Eaters. You’re just one person. You’re not invulnerable.”

“If I wear my cloak, will that make it better?” Harry asks, holding up the silvery fabric in one hand.

Tom says, “I am not letting you leave here without me. We go together or not at all.”

Harry surges up and presses his lips tenderly to Tom's. “I will come back to you, okay?” He says, hands coming up to cradle Tom’s face. “I’ll come back to you.”

Tom stares down at him with a broken expression. “No, we’re going together.”

Harry doesn’t have time for this and he sighs. “I’m sorry, Tom,” and then with practiced steps, he ducks under Tom’s arms and races out of the room, Tom hot on his heels. Harry does pull his cloak on as soon as he is able and Tom stands in the middle of the hallway, nostrils flaring. Harry stands still.

A myriad of Patronuses gallop across the castle yelling, “Death Eaters in Hogwarts!”

Harry smiles, privately. By now thirty students in the extra defense lessons can cust fully corporeal Patronuses. By the time the first Death Eater’s boot crunches on the stone floors, the whole castle is already filled with people ready to fight.

Tom stays in the hallway for a moment longer before the sound of spellfire draws his attention. He reaches for his wand, features locking on a grim expression.

“Harry, if you die tonight, I will slaughter every last person on this earth and then myself. You must come back to me,” promise made, he turns down the corridor.

Harry releases a deep breath and returns to Tom's room, grabbing a pencil and a journal. He hopes that if something does happen to him tonight, Tom’s friends and Sirius will be able to talk him off the ledge. With quiet steps, Harry makes his way down the staircases and out onto the quidditch pitch. The night is bitingly cold and in the sky of the new moon, the only light should come from stars so far away they may have already burned out.

But instead, hanging in the sky above the school, there is a blazing green skull with a serpent tongue. The Dark Mark. In the distance, Harry hears screaming.

On the frozen ground, he begins to sketch.

***

When the first Patonus comes galloping through the Gryffindor common room announcing Death Eaters, Hermione springs into action. She barricades younger students inside the women's dormitory, placing so many notice-me-not charms on the door until the room they are inside is nearly undetectable.

The older students crack their knuckles, draw their wands, and cast their own Patronuses to send out more warnings.

"Hogwarts will not fall tonight," Hermione says.

Two twins with bright red hair look at each other and grin, "Not if we can help it. Deatheaters Metheaters, they've got nothing on us."

"I'm thinking it's time to confuse the shit out of those mask wearing no-names, don't you agree, Gred?"

"Couldn't agree more, Forge."

The twins charge forward yelling, "For Hogwarts!"

A cry goes up and older students stream out of the common room yelling, "For Hogwarts!"

Fred and George have time to lay down three swamps as booby-traps over the cobblestone floors before the Deatheaters come. They have far more time to let out a large selection of fireworks and they do.

When the Death Eaters arrive they are greeted by flaming snakes, cartwheeling monkeys, firework babies, and disturbing images of floating Umbridges that cackle as they go by.

***

There are bodies in the halls. They are strewn about as though they are discarded papers instead of dead bodies. Tom runs past them without pausing to identify the fallen. It matters little; he can't save them or fight them any longer.

"Tom! Where's Harry?" Hermione shouts when Tom rounds one corner heading for the stairs. She is fighting tooth and nail with a masked figure. Up the hall, McGonagall is savagely dueling Death Eater that looks like an older version of Nott. Tonks is taking on two Death Eaters at once and her hair has turned black as coal. All across the school, as far as the eye can see, children are fighting. There is blood all over the floor, crimson droplets staining every school robe.

The students are losing. Tom needs to find Dumbledore. As much as Tom has spent nearly sixty years hating the man, he is a talented wizard. Dumbledore will know what to do and he'll be able to fix this and protect his students. He has to.

A few Deatheaters break off and begin running toward the stairs and Tom sprints after them, wand blazing. He runs past Ginny and Ron and the twins and tries to commit the four of them to memory. He isn't one to get sentimental, but he hopes they all make it through the night. Cedric runs after Tom and catches up saying, "I'll cover your back."

Tom will have time to wonder about the feeling of trust he has for the boy beside him later, but at this moment, he says, "Thank you."

The pair of them reach the top of the staircase and burst out onto the terrace of the astronomy tower to the sight of Dumbledore on the precipice, silhouetted against the blazing green of the Dark Mark.

Draco is shaking and surrounded by Deatheaters and the disgusting werewolf, Greyback.

Before Tom can utter even one word, he hears Dumbledore say in a pleading and weak tone, “Severus, please…”

The answer to his pleas is a swift and cold, “Avada Kedavra.”

Tom feels like the world moves in slow motion. There's a ringing in his ears and this moment feels monumental. But in the end, the whole thing takes about thirty seconds.

It’s nothing big. A rush of green. A rustle of wind. That’s the end of the man who introduced Tom to magic. That’s the grand finale to the man who ended the war with Grindelwald and who trusted Tom enough to take him on as an apprentice when given a second chance.

A rush of green. A rustle of wind. Dumbledore’s body topples off the Astronomy Tower and crashes into the ground below with a sickening thud.

****

Harry’s hands have never sketched so quickly. He sketches a circle of tall walls of frosted glass and over the top of the walls, he sketches a dome. As he sketches he imagines that the glass is unbreakable and unenchantable. This glass will never be broken and never fall. It will never shatter and will never be able to be touched by rock, spell, or fire.

He imagines that the glass will be able to protect everyone he needs to protect.

When the sketch is complete, Harry closes his eyes and tries to see into his own soul. He sees graphite and beneath the smudge marks, there's something beginning to shine brilliantly. Harry focuses on the brilliance and places one hand on the paper he used to sketch the glass enclosure and the other on the icy ground. He's done this before when he thought Tom was in danger. He can do it again now.

Harry feels warmth travel from his wrist, through his heart, and out through his other hand. When Harry opens his eyes, he sees a frosted glass wall in front of him and a dome above his head.

Harry feels rather tired, but he blinks his eyes quickly and remembers how happy his mother was when she saw he lived.

" *Expecto Patronum!"* He shouts, putting as much of his energy as possible into the spell. Seven Ceryneian Hinds burst forth, neighing and shaking their antlers this way and that.

"Find every student and tell them, 'Come to the pitch. Run at the wall, just like platform 9 and ¾. You'll be okay.'"

The Patronuses take off into the night and join a throng of spirit guardians on the way.

****

“We gotta go,” Cedric whispers urgently, “We gotta *go*.”

Tom lets himself be dragged back down the stairs. *Dead.* Dumbledore is *Dead.*

Back in the hall, McGonagall has managed to dispose of the Death Eater she’d been fighting and has herded several students to stay behind her.

Tonks still has one person fighting her and is limping heavily. Ginny has a cut on her cheek and half of Hermione’s hair has burned off.

Harry’s Patronus charges into the hall and delivers a message in Harry’s voice, “Come to the pitch. Run at the wall, just like platform 9 and 3/4 . You’ll be okay.”

Hermione says, “Ron, with me, we need to get the kids.”

Ron says, “On it.”

The two of them take off in the direction of Gryffindor tower.

Ron and Hermione peel away from the crowd as the twins shout, “Follow us,” and begin running toward the exit. Fireworks create a blazing trail behind them making it easy for everyone to follow the Weasley brothers as they use secret passages only they know.

Tom does not follow Fred and Geroge and instead runs toward the Hufflepuff common room with Cedric. The two of them are able to

find a few terrified kids hiding in the trees and plants and run with them onto the grounds, cursing Death Eaters along the way.

A stream of children run at full speed toward the glass-enclosed dome surrounding the quidditch pitch as Deatheaters race after them. The twins and several other senior members of the defense club stand and fight as children continue to run toward the glass.

When the children reach the glass walls, they pass right through onto the other side. Tom can't help but feel pride as he chops Death Eater's head right off their neck. Harry's magic is a marvel.

As more Deatheaters pile onto the field, it becomes clear that the remaining students outside of the dome are not enough to hold off the attack.

"Come on," Tom yells, "It's time to join everyone else."

Ginny says, "Right."

The twins say, "Want to see a magic trick?" and throw stones in their hands to the ground. A giant wall of fire erupts and as the Death Eaters step back in surprise, all the Defense Club members turn and run to the dome. They pass through to the other side and see so many children sitting inside, crying, bleeding, and terrified.

Harry is slumped against one wall breathing heavily.

Tom rushes forward, "Are you hurt?" His hands flutter around Harry, first landing on Harry's pulse which is strong, and then on his forehead, which is warm.

“I just overextended myself, I think,” Harry says, forehead slumping forward against Tom’s chest. “How do we get everyone out?”

Outside the frosted glass, Tom sees a myriad of flashing lights and pounding fists as the Deatheaters attempt to break their way inside.

“Will this hold?” He asks Harry.

Harry says, “I don’t know. Never tried to do something like this before.”

Tom looks at all the children and says, “That is...concerning."

Harry mumbles. "Sorry. I wish Kreacher was here. At least then he could bring us some food while we figure out what to d–”

There’s a loud cracking sound and Kreacher appears next to Harry and Tom. Several children scream.

“Beloved Young Master Potter called?” Kreacher asks in a croaking voice.

Hermione wanders over with a maniacal gleam in her eye. “Kreacher, you can apparate on Hogwarts grounds?”

Kreacher looks at Hermione as though she is particularly stupid, “Kreacher is being an elf. He is going wherever he is called. Young

Master Potter called?”

Tom catches on though and says, “Can you bring other people with you when you apparate?”

Kreacher looks around at all the children and narrows his eyes before saying. “Kreacher can. But Kreacher is being here for his beloved *Young Master Potter.*”

Harry’s voice is muffled by the fabric of Tom’s nightshirt but he says, “Will Kreacher please take all the people inside here to Grimmauld place and then come back and get me last?”

Kreacher says, haltingly, “These are young Master Potter’s friends?”

“I care for them very much,” Harry confirms.

After a lengthy pause, Kreacher replies, “Kreacher will do it but Master Potter must be making many snowflake charms for Christmas this year as payment.”

Harry does not raise his head from Tom’s chest and instead gives a thumbs up.

Over the course of the night, Kreacher takes the hands of two to three children at a time and apparates back and forth from Grimmauld. Halfway through the night, Tonks runs into the dome with blood dripping out of her ears and one ankle trailing behind the other.

“Nasty curse,” she explains to concerned students. "Looks worse than it is."

When Kreacher returns to see Tonks bleeding profusely and changing her nose with every blink, his ears flap excitedly. “A child of Black,” he proclaims running toward her. “Kreacher will take young mistress Halfblood next with special care,” and hugs her about the waist before apparating off.

Hermione, Cedric, and Ron spend the night talking quietly with frightened students and explaining what is happening.

Outside the glass, the spells never stop firing. Transfigured monsters bite at the walls and giant eyes stare malevolently at the frosted glass structure. Harry falls asleep against Tom’s chest and Tom brushes Harry’s hair back and tucks the darling thing more close to his body amidst the chaos.

As the sky is beginning to lighten and pink finds its way into the horizon line, only Tom and Harry remain in the dome. Kreacher returns exhausted and takes both Tom and Harry directly into their bedroom in Grimmauld. Tom wastes no time in removing Harry’s shoes, casting a freshening charm, and tucking Harry into bed.

Kreacher hovers at the foot of the bed and then asks in a small voice, “Kreacher just helped save the lives of these children, didn’t Kreacher? They is going to die if they is not coming here.”

Tom says, “Yes, Kreacher. You helped fight against Voldemort tonight.”

Kreacher bows low and says, “Kreacher is always wanting to fight Him. Kreacher is waiting to fight for years, and now that he has a

taste of fighting, he will not stop."

Kreacher walks out of the room and casts one concerned look at Harry before heading into the hall. Tom draws the curtains closed and is about to slide into bed when Sirius opens the door, a sliver of light making its way into the dark room.

Sirius closes the door behind him and pads silently toward Tom. "I got everyone set up somewhere. Some of the students have sleeping bags in the library, but we'll make do."

Tom says, "Thank you."

Sirius comes and sits on the bed next to Tom. "Are you okay?"

Tom's voice catches when he says, "Dumbledore is dead." He doesn't know why.

Sirius' arms come up around Tom and he hugs the boy. "I'm glad that you're not," he says.

Tom clutches at Sirius' back and revels that the only thing he smells is Sandalwood and sweat instead of alcohol and smoke. "What are we going to do?" Tom asks.

Sirius says, "Our best. It's all we can do."

Tom would roll his eyes, but he's tired. He does end up getting into bed near Harry and Sirius slides in after him. Even though Tom's never had a father, something in the way Sirius begins stroking his

hair is decidedly paternal.

Sirius says, “I thought the two of you were dead. You two came home *last.* All these kids are coming through screaming and crying and bleeding and I did my best for all of them but all I could think was, ‘where are my fucking children?’ I just want to be here with you right now so I can know that you’re still breathing.”

Harry is out cold but his chest is rising and falling and there are barely audible inhales and exhales.

Tom closes his eyes. “We're still breathing.”

Sirius whispers, "And for that, I am grateful."

The two of them fall asleep as the sun rises over London.

Chapter End Notes

> And there we go. Chapter 24 was the first time Harry drew something into the world intentionally (barring Tom) in case you were wondering -- it was the ice bridge for the second task. So there's a bit of a precedent here
>
> Please leave a comment or kudos if you feel so inclined. You only have four chapters left to do it!

When This is Over

Chapter Summary

OMG OMG I am HURTLING to the END. This is so crazy. Enjoy another chapter.

If you have any fanart you want to be included, email it maytal.w.booth@gmail.com

PSA:

Discussions of death, abuse, and general angst

So much angst bc angst is my middle name. I am legally called May_May_angst_0_0 in case you were wondering.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

This stunning masterpiece shows Tom standing next to the whomping willow as it is dying back when he was trapped in the diary. The emotion that exudes from this is phenomenal and sets the mood for this chapter. It was made by AO3's Hyperblaze.

Maybe it was never in my control. I believe that being exposed to a whole soul who could only see beauty irreparably changed the quality of who I am, was, and will be.

Harry wakes up with Tom sleeping behind him. The room is nearly pitch black and Harry takes a moment to collect himself before quietly removing himself from the bed. In his dreams, he remembered Draco taking his memories. He was staring into Draco's soul when it happened, and Harry knows exactly why Draco made the choices he made. Still, knowing occlumency will make it difficult for his memories to ever be taken again can't quite rub off the sting of having his mind invaded. Harry takes a cold shower and scrubs his skin over and over trying to wash off the bitter tint of betrayal.

Once he is as clean as he can get, he pads out of the lavatory and walks down the familiar steps of Grimmauld place. Windows on the staircase show that night has fallen again. Harry works to keep his feet light as he descends, not knowing if there is anyone sleeping in rooms under the stairs.

He comes out to the living room and is greeted by the sight of many children camping out on sleeping bags and chattering with one another. Ginny is braiding the hair of a young Gryffindor and Cedric is playing a game of gobstones with what looks like half of Hufflepuff.

Hermione and Ron are asleep together on a couch. Hermione’s hair has been cropped short and Ron has hand-shaped bruises on his neck.

When Harry walks into the room, the first person to notice him is Lavender Brown. She has taken care of plaiting her hair into a beautiful cascading style and has highlighted her delicate and feminine features with touches of make-up. There’s something

comforting about someone continuing their routines.

“Harry,” she says, “How are you feeling?”

At Harry’s name, all the children in the room turn their eyes toward him. One little girl from Hufflepuff calls out, “Harry Potter!”

There’s a chorus of the younger years yelling out, “It’s Harry Potter!”

There was a time that the attention would have made Harry want to go and hide in his room with Tom. To be fair, part of Harry feels like that now. But there's a larger part of him that sees this for all it is, children asking for comfort and needing a hero.

He leans against one wall and gives the room a half-smile. “Indeed! ‘Tis I, Harry Potter. I’m alright, Lavender. How are you?”

Lavender toys with a loose thread on her nightgown. “Padma didn’t make it,” she says. Harry does another look over the room and sees that indeed Lavander is sitting on a cot with Parvati but Padma is missing.

“How many are here?” Harry asks.

Cedric says, “We haven’t done a school-wide head count. Hermione and Ron got all the Gryffindors out, but most of Ravenclaw didn’t make it in. We have six total Slytherins.”

Blaise Zabini and Theodore Nott from Harry’s year raise their hands.

Harry is incredibly shocked to see them.

"I didn't fancy being branded like cattle," Nott says.

Blaise says, simply, "I would rather not fight."

Harry continues scanning all the faces. "Is Luna hiding somewhere?"

Ginny says, “She didn’t – she’s not here.”

Tom comes running down the stairs shouting, "Harry? Harry! Harry where are you?"

He skids to a stop when he rounds the corner and sees Harry against the wall. He pauses, breathing heavily and a flush on his cheeks. “You’re okay,” he says.

“I’m okay,” Harry affirms.

“Okay.”

Tom comes to stand by Harry at the wall and looks out at the room, doing the same kind of scanning Harry is attempting.

“We’re missing Smith,” he says.

Cedric says with a strong frown, “We are.”

“Zacharias Smith?” Harry says.

Parvati says, “Good riddance.”

Cedric says, “Hey!”

Tom says, “He might be a ponce, but he’s our ponce. When are we staging a rescue mission?”

Hermione stirs on the couch and says, firmly, “Not yet. We need to plan first.”

Cedric says, “No, Tom is right. Zacharias is one of ours, we can’t just leave him.”

The civility ends quickly. The Hufflepuffs raise up and shout they need to rescue Zacharias. Susan Bones lost an arm and no one knows how to re-grow it yet, and she still talks about how she’d lose her remaining arm just to bring Smith back safe.

The Gryffindors (led by Hermione) say that bravery isn’t the same as stupidity. “If you leave now, you’re all going to die,” she says. “How does that help anyone?”

Harry closes his eyes and takes a moment to mourn. Dumbledore is dead. Hogwarts is lost. He’s only fifteen and school has been taken away from him entirely.

“It’s the middle of the night,” he says. “We all had a stressful day. None of us are thinking clearly. I know Sirius is here and so is Tonks. I’m not saying we’re not adults, but maybe let’s wait to make any choices until we talk to someone with some more experience? I think we may be in over our heads.

“And while we wait, what if Smith dies?” Hannah Abbot challenges. “We don’t have the luxury of time.”

“We don’t have the luxury of *impulse,* ” Hermione says.

Hannah glares at Hermione and Hermione glares right back. The tense silence is broken by Kreacher cracking into the room and handing Harry a hot chocolate.

“Kreacher is not going to be sending any students to their school until it is after being Christmas.”

One of the younger students says in a small voice, “Christmas?”

Kreacher nods. “Kreacher is having Yule rites to perform and is needing to make a big feast for brave friends of Harry Potter. Kreacher is not bringing students to their deaths on Christmas. They is needing to *wait.”*

Susan looks at Harry, “Can’t you order him to do something else?”

“I’m not actually a Black,” Harry says, “Kreacher doesn’t really do things because I ask him to but because he thinks they’ll be good for me. I think he mostly just likes me, really.”

Kreacher gives Harry a toothy smile, “Kreacher is having affection for young Master Potter. He is able to resist orders from all except tolerable master Sirius.”

“Tolerable?” Tom asks, “That’s an improvement.”

Kreacher says, “It is being one, yes. Kreacher is needing to begin cooking and children is needing to go to bed.”

The lights in the living room are switched off. Some kids drag their mats to the library and others walk up the stairs to rooms.

Harry just woke up and does not think he’ll be able to go to sleep anytime soon. He walks to Grimmauld’s attic where Kreacher has helpfully set out art supplies for the making of Snowflake charms.

Tom looks at Harry painting the paper until the made charms are sparkling, shining, and glowing. Unlike the ones he made last year, these snowflakes radiate a bit of cold.

“Will you be doing this all night?” Tom asks.

Harry nods, “I’ve got to have them ready by morning.”

Tom says, “Alright then,” and returns to the bedroom. Sirius left the bed sometime during the day, presumably to help out with putting the house together for all her guests.

The room is empty and cold without Harry.

Tom recalls the first Christmas in this house. He thinks of the insufferable red paint on the walls and Kreacher overfeeding Harry. He remembers how happy Harry was when he received a small candy from his aunt. Ridiculous.

And all at once, Tom recalls that he has done nothing to punish Vernon for how Harry was treated. A small bit of recompense seems the perfect gift to himself for Christmas.

Tom summons the bit of Vernon's hair he's kept stored in the closet. Before he decides on what curse he should give Vernon, he decides to scry a bit. Best to tailor the curse to the circumstance.

Tom asks an annoyed Kreacher for a bowl and fills it with water. A hair dropped in and a spell later, Tom stares over the top of the water as an image begins to take form.

Vernon is sitting alone on a couch in front of a TV. The only light in the room comes from the screen. He is staring at the final scenes of a film blankly, nursing a beer.

On the table in front of the television is a half-eaten microwave dinner and a card. The card has been ripped in two but Tom can still read it.

"Dead Dad,

Happy Christmas. Sorry I won't come to visit this year. You know what the courts said after my last visit with you. Mum and I are doing really good though! We're going to go see the Nutcracker. I know you think ballet is only fun if you're a girl but mum says it's kind of magical and one of my friends from Smeltings goes every year. I think you might like it if you give it a try. Love you.

-Dudley."

Vernon takes another sip of his beer and puts it down. The movie ends and the credits role. Vernon grunts and stands up. He shuffles to the light switch holding his beer and turns the light on. The room is illuminated revealing boxes in one corner and a few more half-eaten containers of dinners scattered around. Vernon looks at the waste and shakes his head. He turns off the light and drags himself to a bedroom. He sets his beer bottle down on his night table.

He sits roughly on the bed in the dark room and puts his head in his hands. "Alone again for Christmas, is it?"

He grunts and then picks up his beer bottle and hurls it at the wall. He stares at the wreck for a few moments as beer drips down his walls, and then tucks himself into bed.

Tom ends his scrying to the sounds of rough, ugly crying.

There is nothing more Tom needs to do to punish Vernon. The usual feeling of elation at revenge well enacted is dulled. More than just empty, Tom feels a bit uncomfortable. He takes a breath and does his best to put the image of a greying, lonely man from his mind. In the end, Vernon did this to himself.

***

Christmas in Grimmauld is, in a word, magical. Harry outdoes himself and uses clay Petunia sent him two years ago to fashion small red painted mushrooms and miniature fairies that fly from ice-sculpted flowers to ice-sculpted fruits, leaving behind trails of glitter.

Kreacher manages to bake hundreds of tiny chocolate bonbons over the night and dusts them with powdered sugar to look like snow. He leaves them in between all the decorations for the children to find as presents.

There are far too many people in Grimmauld for true gifts, but they make do with candies and quick sketches Harry makes throughout the day.

As the younger years stare at the house around them with sparkles in their eyes and Collin Creevey takes a thousand pictures with his camera, smiling brilliantly all the while, the older years talk in hushed tones. Throughout the day, adults begin to make their way into Grimmauld. Remus shows up, and then both Weasley parents, and then the true Alastor Moody.

It's Beatrice Haywood coming to Grimmauld that causes Harry to break into a grin. He abandons the drawing of a unicorn for a thirteen-year-old and runs at Beatrice full-tilt.

"Beatrice!" He calls out when the two of them collide.

"Harry! Look at how big you've gotten."

Harry says, "Haha, very funny."

Beatrice looks at him with a suspiciously sentimental gaze. "I remember when you were that tiny twelve-year-old with talent beyond his age hanging out with the fifth-years. God, we were all so much bigger than you then."

When she sees Tom, she says, “How’s it been, stranger?”

Tom gives her a half-smile. “Same old, same old.”

Beatrice says, “Good to see you.”

Tom says, seriously, “You as well. How’s your portrait painting apprenticeship going?”

“I put it on hold for a bit. Circumstances, and all that.”

Cedric, unsurprisingly, is over the moon at Beatrice’s entry to Grimmauld.

Beatrice coming is perhaps the best Christmas present for Harry and every Hufflepuff, but she isn’t at Grimmauld just for fun.

In the mid-afternoon, Tonks surreptitiously gathers everyone over 14 into Sirius’ bedroom while the younger years are engaged in a daring game of hide and seek. Sirius’ room is off-limits, as is the attic. “Nasty things in there, and Harry’s half-finished soul portraits of things give me the creeps.”

When everyone is packed into a room far too small for the number of bodies inside, Tonks passes around two newspapers. The paper crackles as everyone cranes their heads to look at the text. Harry smells pine, peppermint, and chocolate as the bodies press together. There’s a tang of fear underneath the celebration.

The quibbler announces that the ministry has fallen. The muggle newspapers report freak accidents that kill hundreds. There are unexplained fires over London.

"First off, I should say welcome to the Order of the Phoenix. We're the ones who are the resistance against Voldemort. Dumbledore wouldn't want everyone in here to join, but we need all the help we can get, and well, he's dead. We're losing," Tonks says, grimly. "But that doesn't mean we won't fight."

Tom says, "It doesn't."

Alastor Moody says, "We lost our general but we will overcome. Nothing hasty, mind. We need constant vigilance and true planning."

Harry is sketching out a car for a muggle-born 12-year-old and says, "It's me, the snake, and Voldemort that need to die for this to end. We ought to plan for that."

All the Weasleys immediately flinch and the whole room stares at Harry in horror.

"Why would you tell everyone that?" Moody chides.

"You're not going to *die,* " Neville says in a shockingly strong voice, "I won't allow it."

The Weasleys shake themselves and start shouting over each other in rapid succession, "He's been a martyr since he was eleven let me tell

you, not letting it get this far, no," "Harry you fool, we're not letting you die," "Who the fuck told him he needed to die, huh? Who put this in his head" "Walk that back, young man!"

"I HAVE A PIECE OF VOLDEMORT'S SOUL IN MY SCAR!" Harry explodes, "Okay? It sucks, really. I hate that I'm only just starting out and now I'm staring my end in the face, but this is what it has to be. And I know I can't kill Voldemort so when I'm gone, one of you has to do it, got it?"

A voice from deep inside that sounds like Tom says, *I hate this too. I hate everything about this.*

There's a ripple of shock like the calm before a tsunami. Then the waves rise in the form of Tom dropping to his knees in front of Harry.

"There are other ways, Harry. We'll find them. You can't – you can't do that to me. I will *never* let you die. I'm the only one allowed to die for you."

Harry looks at Tom and says, "What if instead of dying for me, I want you to live for me? You couldn't do that?"

"No, no, *no,*" Sirius says, "No dying. Not Tom, not Harry. I am not losing my children just because one of them's got a bit of moldywarts in his scar. We'll find another way."

There are murmurs of assent throughout the room. Cedric says, "We can wait a bit before staging a rescue so that we have time to learn how to keep Harry breathing. Right, 'Puffs?'"

Beatrice Haywood says, "If we decide one life is worth anything less

than the whole world, how can we ever face ourselves?"

Susan Bones nods emphatically.

Harry says, "If one life can save thousands of others, wouldn't it be worth it to let that person die?"

Tom's face sets. "Never, Harry. You hear me? *Never* ."

***

Harry spends the next few days in Tom's room, refusing to leave to leave in the morning until Tom ventures out to go to the library to study ways to save Harry. The whole order of people working to bring Voldemort down throw themselves into the research of how to save Harry and destroy Voldemort's soul. As soon as dinner is finished and night has fallen, Harry begs Tom to take him back to their room.

Throughout the days, Tom wonders if maybe Harry has a method to his clinging. He wonders if keeping Harry in his line of sight forever and always will somehow prevent the tragic ending he sees spilling out in front of them like an augury.

So Tom spends those days like he loves Harry, which he does. He spends the nights kissing Harry and holding him close. He stares at Harry with blatant intensity and adoration, putting every single minute detail of Harry in his mind before each night's sleep. He catalogs Harry's eyes, the bags beneath them, the faded white color of the scar on his forehead, and the way Harry's breath sound when he is sleeping. If only Tom had never found regret for Myrtle, he'd force Harry to make a Horcrux to keep him safe. But Tom will never forget Myrtle and he wishes there was magic strong enough to keep Harry safe from himself.

The fear of losing Harry doesn't make Tom any weaker and it doesn't make Tom love Harry any less. At this point, he doubts anything could.

At night, lying by Tom, Harry says to the ceiling, "If we live through this, want to adopt?"

Tom feels like his heart is being squeezed inside a tiny box and it will never be able to be free again, "Hey, *hey* . Harry. We're gonna live through this."

Harry's voice is small and he sounds like he is trying very hard not to cry, "So you promise then? When all this is over, we'll adopt?"

Tom tries to keep his voice steady and says, "I'll have to marry you first."

"And you will?"

"I will."

"And then we can adopt some kids?"

Tom says, "At least three, I think. Kids without homes to take care of them the way they deserve."

Harry says in a hushed tone, "Do you think you could love a squib?

Because squib child abuse is very high and I think we could be really good for a child who has never been taught to love themselves."

Tom thinks about it. Harry and Tom, raising a magicless child who was hated for something they could never change. It's not so different from the reason Harry, precious Harry, was hated. And there are some kinds of magic that have nothing to do with spells. He doesn't know, truly, if he could ever love someone without magic, but he also knows the right thing to say right now. He never loved anyone before Harry, who knows, maybe one day what he says now will be true.

"Of course I could. If we adopted a squib, they'd be ours, right?"

Harry says, "And we'd buy a nice cottage. Maybe two stories with big windows and a yard for Quidditch practice with the kids. And I'll teach them how to paint and you can teach them self-defense."

Tom sees it then: a shockingly domestic scene. Harry with toddler giggling on his lap and their fingers stained with paint. Himself, making cookies in the kitchen and quizzing an older boy on math. A kneazle underfoot.

"Could we get a kneazle?" He asks.

Harry says, "Definitely. I've always kind of wanted one since Hermione got Crookshanks."

Tom's kneazle is far more dignified than Crookshanks. His kneazle is well-groomed and has a shiny coat. The sky outside is a brilliant azure and the house is pleasantly warm. It's the exact kind of future Tom wished for when he was a toddler. It's the kind of future Tom gave up on before he turned eight.

The darkness of the room feels oppressive when the scene fades from Tom's mind. He wants so desperately for it to come true.

"When we get through this, we will absolutely get married and adopt and buy a house. And you'll be the best painter ever known and I'll be the defense professor at Hogwarts."

Harry's voice breaks, "You're right. We just have to wait a bit longer for this to end. Won't be too much longer."

Tom is struck again with an image, this one far less idyllic than the previous. Harry's body broken at the base of the Hogwarts castle. "Not too much longer," he echoes. It's strange that he can feel such pungent grief even when Harry is still lying by his side.

***

In Spring, Kreacher recruits help in the form of one Aunt Petunia. "It is being too much!" He explodes, "There is too many people here!"

Harry says, "Aunt Petunia can whip anyone into shape."

Kreacher decides that although it would be inappropriate for him to ever get help from a wizard, a muggle might be okay.

Aunt Petunia comes to Grimmauld place incredibly frightened of all the magic and in one afternoon, takes charge of the children and creates a detailed chores chart to relieve Kreacher from his heightened duties. She apologizes to Harry that night for making him do far too

much back when he was a child and he says, "I forgive you."

And that, it seems, is that.

Petunia creates a mundane sense of order everyone begins to cling to with both hands. She cannot go on the small missions members of the order go on to learn about what Voldemort is doing. She can, however, send missives to muggles when they are in danger. She does. She can sit and listen to plans and respond with some detailed muggle logic. She has her own routine of getting to her job early so she can be back in the house by late afternoon to help out and does not begrudge anyone for the large amount of work she takes on. The routine becomes a way for members of Grimmauld to feel like normalcy exists somewhere, and it is comforting.

She says, "This here makes me feel like I'm doing something worthwhile. Like Lily would be proud."

She spends the mornings before going to work talking with Harry and listening to him open up about his fears.

On one foggy morning when everyone else is still asleep, they sit together at the foot of the staircase.

He says to her words he's been wanting to say since he painted Dumbledore's portrait. "Aunt Petunia, I don't want to die. I really don't want to die. I want to *live."*

Petunia's face seems to shatter into a million pieces as she holds her own grief back from consuming her, "I will always wish a thousand times over that Lily never died. I will wish for the rest of my life a million times over that you didn't die if you do, Harry. But… for the last few years, I haven't been able to feel anything other than pride

that Lily was the kind of person who put her life on the line to save you. We all like to think that when pushed, we'd die for those we love, but who really knows? All this to say, you don't owe this world anything. If you want to run away and live a life without all this pressure, you *should.* But if you're the kind of person who would give their life for the people they love, for the world they love, well, that's who just you are. And I will be proud, even if I wish you were the kind of person who could run."

Over the weeks Petunia spends her days after her work in Grimmauld, everyone begins calling her "Aunt Petunia." She sniffs, she nags, and she learns every single person's name.

Kreacher decides muggles aren't so bad after all. Sirius thinks Aunt Petunia is hilarious and she finds Sirius scandalous. "You may have the world convinced you're not a felon, but I'm on to you."

When Petunia learns exactly what happened to Hogwarts, she asks one of the kids for help sending a howler.

"I know these letters that yell at you are out there. I was sent a yelling letter, once. I need to send one."

One of the kids enlisted for help goes to Fred and George. They smuggle a howler from the walls outside Grimmauld and hand it to Petunia with a flourish.

***

After months of searching for the students who disappeared the night Dumbledore died, the first clue comes in the form of a howler from a muggle. Snape is unable to neutralize the letter fast enough.

“SEVERUS SNAPE,” comes the shrill tone of Petunia Evans. “YOU OUGHT TO BE ASHAMED OF YOURSELF. A MONSTER LIKE YOU HAS NO BUSINESS BEING CALLED A TEACHER. YOU THINK YOURSELF A HEADMASTER NOW? I FEEL SORRY FOR EVERY STUDENT UNDER YOUR PURVIEW AND HOPE YOU LOSE YOUR JOB. IT IS MY MOST SINCERE WISH THAT YOU WILL ONE DAY SUFFER AS MUCH AS YOU MADE EVERYONE ELSE IN YOUR LIFE SUFFER.”

The students left at Hogwarts, the cowering Ravenclaws with lash marks on their backs, and the only slightly better off Slytherins, suppress laughter and feel the stirring of hope bubble up for the first time since the dome on the Quidditch pitch was blocked off by spells darker than midnight.

Luna serenely sips some tea and winks at one of the new Dark Arts Professors, torture-loving Amycus Carrow. She whispers, “It won’t be long now.”

***

By the time summer is dawning on the horizon, it becomes clear that there is no way to remove Horcruxes barring death or the Horcrux itself feeling remorse.

“Do you reckon we could get my Horcrux to feel regret?” Harry asks.

Hermione says, “In all honesty, if it could, it would have already. It’s spent more than fourteen years inside your head. Tom was able to feel remorse after just two. If it hasn’t already happened, it’s not going to. I’m sorry.”

“Alright then,” Harry says with forced levity. “Got it.”

“There is one way,” Tom says. “If you can trap Voldemort into a Horcrux, there’s a chance I could become the main body. If that happens, I would be able to feel remorse on my own and reabsorb the Horcrux, probably. But if not, I would simply destroy it and then we can live out our lives and die naturally when the time comes.”

Harry says, “But how would I make Voldemort into a Horcrux?”

Tom admits, “I don’t know. But there has never been magic like yours in the world. At least promise me you’ll try.”

Harry nods, “I promise.”

***

The order of the Phoenix begins to plan for a contingent to go to Hogwarts in order to collect the basilisk and Dumbledore’s portrait. Phineas Nigellus is unable to ask Dumbledore any questions as death eaters have silenced the painting.

“It’s going to be bloody,” Alastor Moody warns.

“Only a few should go," Tonks says.

“I will,” Harry says. “I think Voldemort will be there and we have a chance at finishing this.”

There are murmurs that if Harry is going, everyone is going. Tom says this loudest of all. Kreacher sharpens a knife threateningly.

A few days before the planned entrance to Hogwarts, Harry receives a letter from the Goblin Nation. It says only four words.

“We fight with you.”

When the Order of the Phoenix are lacing up their boots to head into battle, there’s an army behind them.

Tom helps Harry tighten the dragonhide army the goblins sent, fingers ghosting over the nape of Harry’s neck. When the laces are done, Tom leans down and kisses Harry’s at the same spot his fingers touched, breath warm under Harry’s jaw. The whole house is watching them and Harry can’t bring himself to care.

Tom says, “When all this is over, I’m going to marry you.”

Harry looks back at Petunia who is doing her best to keep the younger children away from the apparition points. She makes eye contact with him and Harry can see the sheer amount of desperation and loss clinging to her soul.

Harry feels the same emotions clinging to his. He says, wistfully, “There’s so much we’ll do when all this is over.”

Chapter End Notes

Hmmm wonder if they'll get their future.

How do we feel about Vernon's ending?

Please leave a comment or kudos so I stop staring into the abyss. It's staring back and freaking me out. Also, word to the wise before you read the next chapter, you may want to go back to chapter 21 and look at the beginning of the chapter. And then do that again with chapter 22. And then every chapter from then until now except the interlude. I promise a pay-out is coming.

Thanks for reading and commenting in advance. XX

Abandoned (Reprise)

Chapter Summary

I recommend going back and re-reading chapters one and chapter four for this chapter.

Here it is.

There will be two chapters after this one. They are both important so stay tuned!

PSA:

Tons of Violence. Like all of it. Beware

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Even so, I am changed. Metamorphosed. It seems entirely due to your influence that instead of hatred, I chose love.

“We are fighting with you,” says the goblin king, “because we fight for magic. We are fighting for Harry Potter and the worlds he creates, not for wizards. We will never lift our swords for you again unless it is in service of magic, and we will expect no payment save the chance to create an enduring legacy of soulbound portraits.”

Harry is covered to his neck in dragonhide armor and stands with the command of an army at his feet. He turns 16 today. “As you have said, so mote it be.”

The goblins release a guttural cry and pound their axes, swords, and javelins on the stone ground beneath their feet.

The goblin king raises one jeweled hand to call forth silence and says,

with finality, “So mote it be.”

***

Percy Weasley is the last fighter to join the impromptu army. He comes to Gringott’s on the day of the battle with his hands in his pockets and an apology on his tongue. “I’ve always tried to do the right thing. I guess, somewhere along the way, my definitions got a bit mixed up. I was a fool and I am sorry.”

Molly and Arthur welcome his back with open arms. Ginny gives him a light punch to the shoulder and says, “Missed you.”

Fred and George give him a critical once-over and then say, in unison, “Good to have you.”

Susan Bones finds a goblin healer and grows her arm back. Parvati and Lavender tie up their beautiful hair and prepare for battle. Neville walks with power and grace never before seen. Kreacher holds two goblin daggers and has a wicked grin pasted across his face.

Back at Grimmauld, the Slytherins and children under fourteen stay behind with Aunt Petunia.

The walk through Hogsmeade is bleak. Shops have boarded windows and some have been reduced to rubble. In the darkness, Harry sees eyes peeking out from windows behind curtains that are drawn shut. Beyond the whispers of movement seen in the blackness beyond, the town seems to be inhabited only by ghosts. Abeforth and Rosmerta have both left their shops in order to fight.

The twins scout out secret passageways in Hogsmeade only to find them blocked or filled in. So, instead, the group enters Hogwarts in the darkness. A team of cursebreakers led by Bill Weasley break down the wards. Beatrice Haywood and Cedric Diggory stand close together, wands drawn.

When the wards break, they break quietly, and the crowd goes forward into the waiting school.

Everyone has an objective. Some are hoping to fight. Many hope to rescue students and bring them back to the safe house (although many do not actually know where exactly Grimmauld *is.*) Harry needs to find Dumbledore's portrait and Tom is planning on collecting Ouroboros.

Harry and Tom enter the school together under the invisibility cloak and make their way to the headmaster's office. The school halls are familiar but the scent of dark magic is foreign. The halls seem at first deserted as the order members creep along.

But then… out of shadows Death Eaters take form and train their eyes on the gathered adults and children.

One man with slicked black hair and a mean smile licks his lips, "Well, look here gentlemen. Looks like we caught ourselves some real treats."

Neville Longbottom shouts, "Expeliarmus," and the Death Eaters laugh.

"Still using children's spells?" one asks, "I suppose you are children."

Susan Bones releases a wordless bombarda which clatters into the shield of a Death Eater.

The spells, after that point, are deadly. The darkened halls are lit up with flashes of red, purple, yellow, of sickly green.

Harry hears more than sees it when someone hits the ground with finality. It hasn't even been ten minutes and someone is already dead.

They must have alerted a Death Eater somehow when they were taking down the wards. This is no longer the covert mission Harry hoped it would be.

"This is an ambush," he hears Neville whisper.

Tonks grows herself muscles and holds her wand high, "This is war."

War.

Harry grits his teeth and makes to run toward the headmaster's office. As he races down the halls, the cloak slips off of Tom's body.

***

Tom feels the heat of Harry at his slide shifting away and makes to grab onto his artist a second too late. Harry is already gone when he stretches out his hand and due to his wearing the cloak, Tom can no longer see where Harry has gone.

As soon as the cloak slips off Tom's body, there are spells trained toward him. Tom has spent the last three years building up layers of humanity and working to be the kind of person Harry could be proud of. He's shed the years of fury and all-consuming hatred he harbored for others. Harry would never need the savage Tom Riddle was back in the 1940s.

But these people fighting Tom, they belong to another version of *him*. They are weak servants and Tom has mastered them before. Today, he has no need for the carefully curated better version of himself. He needs to be, in some capacity, the person he was. He needs to be a monster.

Tom feels something inside of himself settle. He observes with a cold fury one of the death eaters laughing gleefully as they cast the cruciatus on Cedric.

Tom whispers, "Expulso." Blue light flashes from his wand and the Death Eater blows apart.

Moody says, "Well done."

Tom begins moving toward the stair cases, blasting Death Eaters to smithereens as he goes. He needs to get to Ouroboros. And then, he needs to find Harry.

Cedric and Beatrice try to follow him but are stopped by the spellfire. Tom loses them a few paces down and continues on his way.

He makes it to Myrtle's lavatory unscathed. He hisses out, *"Open,"* to the sink and slides down his way to the chamber.

He runs to the main room, yelling out, “ *Ouroboros.”* He hears nothing. Not even a hint of coils running over the stones.

In the dim light, Tom looks around as panic begins to rise. Ouroboros’ body spreads out in front of his eyes, stretching into spaces beyond the shadows. The body does not do so much as twitch.

“Ouroboros,” Tom tries again. He is met by silence. In the corner, he notices scratches on the wall as if from spells that did not hit their target. There’s a small huff of air out of Ouroboros’ nostrils. Tom relaxes momentarily. He’s alive then.

The evidence all leads to one conclusion: Ouroboros is paralyzed. In the silence of the chamber, Tom is met with an immediate feeling of disquiet. The realization causes him to begin backing away. He needs to *leave.* He needs to leave *now* . He takes a deep breath and steadies himself for sprinting away from whatever happened here… from whoever knew there was a basilisk and was able to bring it down.

In the end, he does not even make it one step.

There’s a kind of rumbling and intense pressure. Tom feels like he is being pressed to the floor by the weight of the entire castle. He sinks to his knees struggling to get any air.

The space in front Tom begins to shimmer with raw power. Voldemort cracks into existence, skeletal body draped in robes the color of midnight and serpentine face appearing made from cracked marble.

He looks down at Tom on his knees, struggling to breathe, with an amused expression.

“And the alleged prodigal son,” he hisses out in parseltongue, *“returns home at last.”*

***

Out in the corridors, the twins rain down mayhem from their inventions as Peeves cackles beside them. Death Eaters find flowers sprouting from the tips of their wands and their tongues growing to debilitatingly long lengths.

They are menaces, they always have been, and they create so much chaos the Death Eaters hardly know which way is up.

Lavender Brown runs toward the Ravenclaw Dorms with Parvati at her side. This is different than the night the Death Eaters came to the castle. She will not run and she will not hide. She may have been called nothing more than a pretty face nearly her whole life, but she’s a Gryffindor and today is her time to prove her bravery.

Out on the Quidditch pitch, Bill Weasley is surrounded by a number of goblins as he works on breaking the dark spells surrounding the glass dome.

In the kitchens, Kreacher starts a house-elf rebellion.

***

Harry stands outside the headmaster’s office, biting his lips. There is no fighting on this side of the castle, but he fears that if he says

anything wrong, it will alert those around him.

“Think Harry, think. What would Snape choose as a password?”

Harry stares at the gargoyles and a bead of sweat drips down the back of his neck. Harry tries to recall all the times he saw Snape, sifting through carefully maintained memories in his occlumency-built palace in his mind to find what he needs.

There’s regret, self-hatred… determination. Love.

The first word in Harry’s mind is almost right, but he can tell it won’t be the password, “Lily.”

Harry tries to think about how Snape’s soul would change after killing Dumbledore, becoming the headmaster, and suffering in the way he likely has his whole life.

The answer comes to Harry in the form of a memory of his aunt sending a howler.

With certainty, Harry confidently says, “Petunia.”

The door swings open.

Harry carefully ascends the steps and shuts the door behind him.

Sitting at the headmaster’s desk is Snape with steepled fingers and a

grim expression. Harry knows this man inside and out and understands that despite his hatred for Harry, Snape will never do he or any student harm.

“You fool,” Snape says after attempting to locate Harry despite his invisibility, “You’re walking to your death.”

Harry pulls the cloak off his body and says, calmly, “That is the plan, yes.”

Snape closes his eyes. “Your mother would have wanted you to live so much longer.”

Harry says, “And I want her to have lived so much longer than she did. I guess that sometimes what we want has very little to do with what needs to happen.”

Snape spits, “This is hardly the time for philosophy.”

Harry trains his eyes on the portrait of Dumbledore. From his place in the frame, Dumbledore waves cheerfully with two left hands and gives Harry a wink.

Harry says, with a hint of whimsy, “I would argue that every time is a time for philosophy.”

Snape says, “I do hope that what you sacrifice tonight is worth the price.”

Harry says, “It will be worth *everything.* ”

***

When Draco realizes that a battle has begun, he is in the Slytherin common rooms being told by Slughorn (the potions professor who replaced Snape once Snape became headmaster) to stay put and that everything will be over soon.

Draco made his choices and that's why he's had to watch the Ravenclaws and muggle-borns being flayed almost to death in the Dark Arts class. He's been forced to see Hogwarts change from a school to a place of constant abject terror. There was life here and it's all been snuffed by the tyrannical hatred one monster harbors for everything.

Draco is sick. Draco is sick of himself and the helplessness that's been clinging to his life ever since he realized his parents were chained to the worst wizard in three generations.

Draco stands before he realizes what he's doing. Goyle asks, "What are you doing?"

"Fighting," Draco says.

Goyle asks, haltingly, "For the Dark Lord?"

Goyle and Crabbe are both marked. Draco answers, "Who else?" even as he internally sheds the yoke of his oppression.

He's going to fight for Harry. It's what he's wanted to do since he was

thirteen and staring up at a painting of snowy peacocks. He's never seen anything like that and creation is far more inspiring than destruction.

He's going to fight for himself. He's going to fight for a future where his children won't grow up hearing about how he is a murderer or was imperiused even when they know he is lying to them. He will never lock them outside in the snow overnight for touching a diary.

He's going to fight for a future where school is never anything more or less than a place of learning. He's going to fight for a future where he never has to feel like doing the right thing is abandoning his family.

In the end, his parents made their choices. It's time for Draco to make his.

"But also, stupefy."

Crabbe and Goyle fall backward and Draco stares out at the common room. "Whatever choice you make tonight, make it because you believe something."

The Slytherins stare back at him, some of them looking to their arms.

"Do you think Harry Potter will win tonight?" Pansy Parkinson asks.

Draco says, "I do."

"Then I'll stay here until this is over," she says. "I'm not fighting with

or against anyone."

There are murmurs of agreement.

Millicent Bulstrode stands defiantly. "Well, I believe that everything this year has been a bit fucked and I hate everyone. Let's go kill some shitheads or something."

Draco gives her a smile. "Let's do it."

The two of them leave the common room and head toward the sounds of fighting. The great hall is overrun with students attempting to create space for the injured and blocking the doors from the Death Eaters.

Draco and Millicent move up the corridor with Draco hoping against all hope that his mother isn't here tonight. Draco stops abruptly as dozens of house-elves pour into the great hall wielding kitchen knives and goblin-made longswords. At the front runs Kreacher, the elf from the house of Black.

"FOR MASTER POTTER! FOR MAGIC! WE FIGHT!"

A loud cry goes up from all the elves, "FOR OURSELVES! FOR OUR CHILDREN! FOR MAGIC! WE FIGHT!"

"What on Earth…" Millicent says.

The elves wield their weapons and begin savagely attacking the ankles of the Death Eaters in the great hall.

Draco shakes himself, “Let’s get a move on. We need to go help whoever needs it.”

Millicent says, “Right. Right.”

Draco knows that the memory of this moment: children limping in the hall, house-elves cutting the Achilles tendons of the men Draco grew up calling family friends, the scent of blood in the night air, will be seared into his mind for the rest of his life.

Tomorrow, he can mourn the childhood that he never got to finish. He can fall apart in a cell or as a free man. But today, he needs to fight.

***

“ *He’s asleep,”* Voldemort says, motioning to the basilisk. *“He got… confused. He no longer knew me as his master. It would be a pity to kill such a beautiful serpent, but I am sure I can teach him who his master is once I deal with you. At first, I was almost taken in by your story. A child of mine, out of thin air. But nothing is out of the realm of understanding for Lord Voldemort. How did you escape the confines of the diary, Horcrux?”*

The pressure on Tom falls away enough for him to say, “My name is *Tom* .”

All at once, Tom finds himself held against the wall as though pinned by daggers through his skin. The pain is excruciating and he would cry out but the pressure on his throat from the invisible binds is too great for him to say anything.

“You have no name. You are not a person. You are a wayward possession. I should have expected it, of course. I can even respect your thirst for power. You are that which was once myself, after all. But I cannot have a piece of my soul running around unchecked.”

Tom wants to call out that he is not Voldemort’s soul, not any longer. But he cannot speak.

“What I do not respect is how you could be so close with the Potter boy. I have seen it all from Draco. Your kisses. Your sentimental nature. You seem, precious Horcrux, to have abandoned me.”

On the word “abandoned” a sliver of new pain cuts through Tom. It feels like he is being run over by glass shards. He flinches and clenches his jaw.

“Oh,” Voldemort says with faux pity, *“Does that hurt? Poor thing.”*

If anything, the pain intensifies.

“When I win this battle and lay Harry Potter’s body over the side of the castle to be pecked at by the thestrals, I will return to you. If you ask very nicely, I may show you the memory of your poor Harry’s demise. Maybe then, I will release you from your binds and help you return to the inside of the diary, where you belong.”

Tom feels static feel his ears. He can’t go back to the diary. He can’t do that again. He can’t. He can’t. He *can’t.*

“I will not forsake you even if you have forsaken me. Do not fear. I will be back for you.”

Left in the darkness with nothing to keep him company but his thoughts, pain, the sound of dripping water, and a slumbering basilisk, Tom thanks the hubris of this monstrous version of himself. Tom is still awake and so long as he can think, he can find a way out.

He must.

He will.

***

The conversation with Dumbledore is ultimately rather simple. Harry asks what he needs to do and Dumbledore says, “At this point, I have the utmost faith in you.”

Dumbledore informs Harry that the snitch on the Headmaster’s desk is for him. “Just pop it in your mouth and get a gift.”

Harry dryly remarks, “You know what that sounds like, don’t you?”

Dumbledore adopts an expression of serene innocence and Harry obligingly catches the snitch in his mouth the way he caught it all those years ago when he was still getting used to magic and wonder and having a place to call home.

The snitch opens, revealing a stone inside.

“The resurrection stone,” Dumbledore announces. “It may serve you tonight.”

“Noted,” Harry says, pocketing the item.

From all around the castle, a high voice reverberates.

YOU HAVE FOUGHT VALIANTLY. SURRENDER HARRY POTTER TO ME AND YOU ALL MAY LIVE. SURRENDER, HARRY POTTER, AND THE FIGHTING WILL END. YOU HAVE ONE HOUR.

“Is there anything else you needed from me?” Dumbledore asks.

Harry realizes that this is the beginning of a dismissal. Harry ought to go and die before the night is over. Everything in his whole life was manicured to get him to this point. He even knows the answer to his question and he still feels the need to ask.

“Do you think I might live through this?” He wants a future, desperately.

Dumbledore says, “There is a chance. I would not say it is an impossibility.”

Harry tries out the words, “Not impossible. I suppose I’ll make do with those odds.”

SURRENDER, HARRY POTTER, AND THE FIGHTING WILL END. YOU

HAVE ONE HOUR.

Dumbledore says, “I imagine that’s your cue.”

Harry replies, “I imagine so. I’ll catch you on the other side, old man.”

Dumbledore says, eyes sparkling as if from an inside joke, “My boy, if you do not live through tonight, I doubt that you will end up in the same dark place as I.”

It’s a heavy statement, and for once, Harry feels no need to say anything at all in response, either as rebuke or consolation. He settles himself by saying, “Well then, goodbye. I guess.”

“Ave, Mr. Potter. You have made Hogwarts proud.”

Harry leaves his wand on the table of the headmaster’s desk. With a stone in one hand, a pen in the other, and an old familiar diary in his pocket, Harry walks into the forbidden forest.

***

Lavender Brown finds herself pinned down in the hall outside the Ravenclaw dorms as Parvati screams for help.

The man above her is enormous, muscled more like a beast than a man. He drags the pad of his calloused fingers over her cheek and brushes away Lavender’s startled tears.

He moans, “Oh, you will be so delicious. I did always like them pretty…”

“Leave her alone! Stupefy. Stupefy. Stup - stupe – stupefy. Please – please –” Parvati cries trying to get her magic to help her at all.

Lavender struggles to get her wrists free from where she is pinned to get her wand so she can do something, and Parvati is still screaming and trying to stun the man atop Lavender. He seems entirely impervious to the spells and opens his mouth revealing rows of inhumanely sharp teeth.

Lavender realizes what is about to happen a second before the teeth close over her face. She hears more than feels a chunk of flesh being ripped off and swallowed by the man.

There’s a loud keening sound and Lavender cannot tell if it’s coming from her or Parvati. Maybe it’s vain, but in a distorted way, the only thing Lavender can think is, “I’ll never be pretty again.”

The man above her must be in the infamous Greyback. The werewolf who developed a taste for human flesh even when the moon is far from full. He licks his lips and releases a breathy groan. “Your taste is… divine.”

He opens his gaping maw to take another bite and Lavender keeps her eyes open to watch it happen. There’s a kind of static calm that takes over her.

This isn’t the ending she’d planned for her life. She supposes no one really plans to be eaten alive. But she’d hate to die screaming and

begging for mercy. If she's going to die, she will die with dignity.

From around the corner, Sybill Trelawney comes running dressed in duel robes and holding a giant crystal ball. Without pausing even one second, she throws the ball with deadly accuracy at Greyback's head.

"You will not kill her!" She yells, "Leave my students alone!"

The ball shatters on impact, shards of glass cutting into Greyback's skull and the force of the ball snapping his neck forward at an unnatural angle.

He grunts and falls backward, thwacking into the ground behind him.

Trelawney is still running and she shoves Greyback's fresh corpse off of Lavender's legs, pausing only then to cradle the girl in her arms.

"Epiksey," she says tenderly, pointing her wand at Lavender's cheek. Lavender feels a kind of stretching sensation. "Sine sensu." Lavender's entire face goes numb.

"Can you stand, dear?" Trelawney asks. "I am afraid we'll be needed inside the Ravenclaw tower.

Lavender still feels that calmness and tries to stand up. "No, no," Trelawney says, "Let's help you up. Parvati, dearheart, come here."

Parvati has been shocked silent and her hands are sweaty when they clasp onto Lavender's arms.

Supported by both Trelawney and Parvati, Lavender makes her way into the Ravenclaw dorm with shaking legs.

Trelawney looks at both girls with something that looks like fierce pride and relief. “I am sorry you had to see that and experience that. I am afraid it will get worse before it gets better.”

Drawn by the noise, some Ravenclaws come down the steps from their rooms. Luna Lovegood has a bruise on her cheek and she bounces down. “Is the battle started then?”

“Oh yes,” Trelawney says. “Duck, dear.”

Luna bends as the door opens and a flash of green shoots over exactly where Luna’s head had been seconds prior. Barely blinking, Trelawney mutters something and the intruder slips on some ice and hits their head.

“Diffindo,” she says, as if as an afterthought. A large gash appears on the neck of the Death Eater.

“If you all stay with me tonight, you will make it through.”

Luna says, “I think I need to fight.”

Trelawney looks at her and says, “I certainly won’t stop you.”

Cho Chang, Terry Boot, Luna Lovegood, and a few more exit the common room with their wands. Padma runs over to Parvati and Lavender. Parvati immediately crushes Padma in a hug and Padma clings back, crying.

The rest of the children stay in the tower and watch in absolute surprise as Trelawney stands her ground and protects everyone. She does not have the best casting or strongest magic but she seems to know exactly what is going to happen a few moments before spells are cast and side-steps and sabotages at every step.

Lisa Turpin, sitting at the top of the stairs in the tower, says, “Blimey. I reckon she was a true Seer this whole time.”

Seemingly from the stones in the tower, a cold voice reverberates.

YOU HAVE FOUGHT VALIANTLY. SURRENDER HARRY POTTER TO ME AND YOU ALL WILL LIVE. SURRENDER, HARRY POTTER, AND THE FIGHTING WILL END. YOU HAVE ONE HOUR.

“He’s bargaining all of Hogwarts for Harry,” Padma whispers.

“He can’t. Harry can’t go,” Parvati says. “He’ll die.”

Trelawney fires an expulso just as a Death Eater attempts to enter the tower. Too quietly to be heard by anyone over the explosion, she whispers, “He will.”

***

YOU HAVE FOUGHT VALIANTLY. SURRENDER HARRY POTTER TO ME AND YOU ALL WILL LIVE. SURRENDER, HARRY POTTER, AND THE FIGHTING WILL END. YOU HAVE ONE HOUR.

Draco finds himself shoulder to shoulder with Longbottom and Ginny when the announcement shakes the castle.

“Decided to join the other side, then?” Longbottom asks, deflecting a nasty hex.

“Took me long enough,” Draco says.

“Welcome to the resistance,” Ginny says. “It’s good to have you.”

Draco is hit in the side of his leg with a burn. He lets out an undignified squeak and then replies, “It’s good to be here.”

Rodolphus Lestrange enters the hall and Neville immediately stiffens at Draco’s side.

“I am going to kill him,” Neville says.

Draco believes him.

It is a fierce duel, but Lestrange falls.

***

Ron and Hermione find themselves engaged in a battle with Bellatrix Lestrange, both of them hardly strong enough to hold her back.

“Oh the ickle mudblood and blood traitor, we’re going to have so much fun.”

“Don’t – know – if this so much fun,” Ron says.

Hermione says nothing and focuses on deflecting whatever curses she can block and ducking under the ones she can’t.

“Little mudblood cut her hair and now she looks like an ugly boy.”

“Oi,” Ron says, casting a confringo that Bellatrix shields against easily, “She’s a beauty.”

“Ron, now is not the time,” Hermione says. “You can call me beautiful *after.”*

“Young love,” Bellatrix sighs, “Pity it won’t last.”

As Ron and Hermione fight, a magpie patronus glides overhead saying, “Bring the injured to the Quidditch pitch.”

“Guess Bill got rid of all the magic outside of Harry’s dome,” Ron says.

Hermione rolls under a cruciatus curse and summons a flock of birds to distract Bellatrix. “Do you think he’s gone to Voldemort by now?”

Bellatrix hisses, “You shall not speak his name!”

Ron is hit with a curse that makes his skin break out in boils and Hermione hastily casts the counter.

Ron says, “Harry? Yeah. I don’t think he’d do anything else.”

Hermione blinks away tears. “...Yeah.”

***

Snape is slumped against the wall of the shrieking shack with Nagini’s venom in his neck. Voldemort has already left with his familiar after telling him that, “the wand is not working for me as it should. Your death will serve a glorious purpose. Thank you… for serving me until the end.”

That he was bitten and is dying is not a surprise. He’s known from the beginning he was not meant to survive this battle.

The sound of the shack opening and Tom Black riding inside seated on a basilisk with a phoenix, Fawkes, perched on his shoulder, is, however, a shocking surprise.

“Ouroboros,” Tom says, before hissing something unintelligible. The basilisk lurches forward with closed eyes and noses at Snape’s neck

before settling back.

Fawkes detaches from Tom’s shoulder to settle by Snape. Fawkes rests his beautiful head against Snape’s inured neck and thick, pearly tears fall from his eyes onto the wound. Snape startles as the pain vanishes and the skin begins to mend. His neck repairs.

Snape knows perhaps it is needlessly sentimental but there’s a part of him that feels like this was the work of Dumbledore from beyond the grave. Phoenixes rarely cry for anyone, no matter the injury.

Tom stares at Snape with the expression of someone who is both a young man and someone who has lived for an endlessly long time. There was always some kind of mask worn by Tom and it’s been stripped off, laying the angry vengeful man in front of him bare to be seen. All at once Snape feels sixteen, angry and acne-faced, and hoping to be part of something bigger than himself. He sees the man he would have given everything to serve. If he'd been sixteen and faced with this version of Tom, Snape would have followed him anywhere and obeyed any order.

Tom looks down at Snape's slumped form and commands, simply, “Live.”

***

Sirius sees Ron and Hermione struggling against Bellatrix, and even though she is his cousin, he works his way over to lend his support. In the end, it takes all three of them casting together, but in the end, she dies.

***

Harry walks through the forest. In front of him, his mother and father appear.

“You’ve been so brave,” his father says.

“You’ve lived so well,” his mother says.

Fred Weasley flickers into the space in front of Harry’s eyes with his hands in his pockets.

Harry feels his heart in his throat, “Fred?”

Fred gives Harry a half-hearted wave, “Hey there. Time to finish this, yeah?”

“Fred, you’re not – you didn’t –”

“Die? Oh, I did, absolutely. But I was always going to die. I just got across the finish line a tad early. I'm a bit of an overachiever but don't tell Percy.”

Harry tries to say something, but he can’t find the words.

“Oh my darling, you don’t need to say anything,” his mum says. “Nothing at all.”

When Harry enters the clearing where Voldemort stands, he does not hide. He does not cower. He simply removes his cloak and says, clearly, “I’m here.”

Voldemort trains his crimson eyes on Harry Potter. “Come to die?”

Harry finally finds his voice even though his heart is aching. He says, “Ready when you are.”

The flash of green is so familiar it *aches.* There’s a gentle kind of breeze and the smell of pine needles.

This isn’t such a bad way to go, Harry thinks.

Harry opens his eyes in his cupboard from childhood. The lightbulb is flickering off and on above his head. The main light in the small and cramped space comes from the fire that doesn’t burn. Harry drew it almost four years ago.

“Harry,” a voice that sounds like Tom says. Harry turns and sees someone that looks like an older version of Tom with crimson eyes crouching behind him in the cupboard. He looks so very fond of Harry.

“Tom?” Harry tries.

The man shakes his head. “Not really your Tom, but close enough I suppose.”

“Who are you?” Harry asks. Everything about the man feels so familiar. Talking with him feels like Deja Vu. Harry knows this man. He knows him maybe better than anyone else he’s ever known.

“You know what I am.”

The Horcrux, of course.

“And you – we’re dead, then?”

The Horcrux shakes his head and says, “I believe that’s just me, actually. The price of the killing curse is always a soul. I worked to make sure the curse went after my bit of that instead of yours.”

“Oh,” Harry says. He doesn’t know why, but he feels like he loves the man in front of him. Maybe he’s the kind of person who will always care for the various versions of Tom spread throughout the world.

“I don’t want to kill Voldemort,” Harry says.

The Horcrux looks at Harry and says, “So don’t. You’re not the killing type. Nothing wrong with that.”

Harry asks, “What should I do then?”

The Horcrux says, “Whatever it is you want.”

Harry thinks about how Tom became someone real in the world by feeling remorse. Maybe this Horcrux can do the same. “Do you think you could ever…”

“Feel sorry the way your Tom did? I didn’t think so, but I suppose we’ll never know. I am dead, Harry. There’s no coming back for me.”

Harry flinches. “So you’re gone, then? Forever. Just you?”

The Horcrux looks incredibly peaceful. “That’s right, just me. Forever.”

“So I can – I can go back?”

The Horcrux says, “I think all you need to do is open the door. You’ve never belonged here in the darkness.” And because Harry can see souls, he sees that those words mean so much to the Horcrux. He can tell that the Horcrux has spent years hating that Harry was kept in this space under the stairs while the people who should have loved him most wished he would disappear. He can tell of the agonizing hours of fury and anguish and the utter relief felt when Harry finally found his place with magic and light.

Harry looks to the door of the cupboard. “You don’t belong in the darkness either. You deserve to see everything,” he says, thinking of Tom stuck inside the diary for fifty years.

The Horcrux says, “Oh, but Harry, I did see everything. I’ve spent fourteen years watching you grow up, watching you make whole worlds out of nothing but scrap paper and broken pencils. These last fourteen years, they changed *everything.”*

Harry says, stubbornly, "It can't have been enough."

"Before I met you, all I knew was anger and hatred. The first thing you taught me was sadness. Then you taught me indignance and wonder and what it means to see beauty. You taught me what it feels like to love. I know that it feels unfair to you right now, but trust me Harry, what you have given me is more, far more than enough."

Harry says, “I wish you could come with me,” even as he moves to open the door to the cupboard.

The Horcrux says, “I’ve been here long enough. All I wish is that you find happiness."

Harry pauses with his hand on the door, "Then I wish the same for you."

Harry opens the door as wide as he can, causing the narrow space to fill with brilliant light and leaving both the Horcrux and his childhood cupboard behind. Words follow him on his way out.

"*Goodbye, Little Soul Traveler. Goodbye, Harry Potter.”*

***

Harry wakes as he is laid down on the ground gently by a sobbing Hagrid. Voldemort announces, “Harry Potter is dead. In the end, he was little more than a boy. Surrender now and you will live.”

Harry cracks open one eye to see a huge number of goblins, house-elves, adults, and students staring at him in grief-filled horror. Tom is sitting on top of Ouroboros and looks lost and defeated.

Harry sits up and everyone around him gasps.

“Bully for you,” he says, walking toward Voldemort. “I survived the killing curse. *Again.* ”

Harry isn’t entirely sure if his plan is going to work. As he walks toward a disbelieving Voldemort, he slides the diary into his hand. He flips to the courtyard of inheritance page and tries to put his trust in Tom’s plan. He promised to try to make Voldemort a Horcrux. No one deserves to be trapped in a diary for fifty years, but Harry will make Voldemort drawings. Maybe, with time, Voldemort will be able to feel true remorse. Harry is willing to wait however long it takes

Voldemort raises his wand as Harry steps up to him, hands outstretched. “AVADA KE–”

Harry’s left hand rises to Voldemort’s face as he keeps his right hand on the diary. Voldemort’s wand clatters to the ground. Unlike every other time he’s done this, it hurts terribly. With a pain greater even than the cruciatus, Harry feels a kind of burning poison travel through the veins of his left hand, through his heart, and out to the other side.

Harry struggles to keep standing. Voldemort disappears and re-appears in the empty bundle in the courtyard as a flayed baby.

The war is over, right then. All remaining Death Eaters drop their wands as their dark marks fade to pale white scars, ghosts of what they had been only moments prior. They put their hands up, defeated, as the surviving adults and goblins come forward and take them into

custody.

“What did he do?” One Death Eater asks. "What did he do? What kind of magic was that?"

Nagini lets out a wordless cry, and Tom urges Ouroboros forward. The basilisk swallows the smaller snake whole.

Harry barely sees any of this. He keeps his eyes trained on the book and at the bundle. The image of the baby shudders and stretches, and then shatters. Ink begins to pour out from the pages.

Harry clenches his fist.

Voldemort did not have enough soul to root. There’s nothing of him left now.

***

This is how it ends, with an abandoned, dripping book. Black ink spreads out from the pages like blood. Within the worn leather of the diary are memories of decades worth of tragedy and loneliness. It holds the carcasses of yesterday that gave way for the souls of tomorrow.

There was life in the book once. Life, like entire worlds, that spread ever outwards. The legacy of that life is just this, a worn leather diary filled with depictions of death.

The weight is too much of a burden to bear, and like Atlas with the sky on

his shoulders, Harry collapses. They find him like that, Ron, Hermione and Tom. Harry is kneeling on the charred earth, a set of empty robes in front of him, a bone-white wand in his fist, and his fingers are the color of midnight.

Tom lays a gentle hand on his shoulder. Harry does not acknowledge it. "It's over," Tom says, gently.

"…Yes."

Ron tries to smile. "You did it, mate, we won."

Harry shakes his head slowly. "No -- no, we didn't win. No one won. We've all been losing from the beginning. The war isn't over, not really. It hasn't ended, it's just been…"

(Abandoned.)

Chapter End Notes

> THIS IS NOT THE END! I REPEAT THIS IS NOT THE END! THERE ARE STILL TWO CHAPTERS REMAINING THAT YOU SHOULD DEFINITELY READ, BEAUTIFUL PEOPLE.
>
> *ahem*
>
> I apologize for shouting.
>
> If y'all have been wondering why I made the whole thing about souls and rooting such a big deal, it was for this moment. Soul portraits needing to take root are referenced in chapters 5, 11, 18, 23, 32, and 34.
>
> For those who are wondering, the words of the Horcrux begin in chapter 21: plasticity. They begin then because the concept of soul plasticity definitely applies to Tom, but that whole chapter also explains the growth of the Horcrux. The Horcrux is seen in

chapters 5, 14, and 21. Altogether, here are the words:

Is it possible to exist in stagnance for eternity? Is it possible to spend every waking moment with someone and not grow to feel great emotions toward them? If the opposite of hatred is indifference and not love, was apathy ever an option?

Apathy was never an option. Amidst more than a decade of opacity, at least that much is clear. It all goes back to two bright green eyes and a child sniffling in the back of the closet. Something woke up then: a remnant of emotion long forgotten. Perhaps it was indignance. No. It was anger. It was fury mixed with something decidedly sad. Sadness. It pierces through stagnant numbness. How novel.

And yet, it seems novelty is constant. Through the eyes of a child, the world is shockingly captivating. There's magic everywhere. Even here in this dark closet. The sky is a brilliant azure. The sun is molten gold. Life blooms even in the ugliest of places. Warmth permeates even the coldest spaces. This is magic, pure and simple. This is a new way of looking at the world. Like Dorothy in Oz, the world has taken on an emerald hue.

The magic begins with a tentative stroke of soft graphite across the back of a discarded receipt. Oh, it's beautiful. When was the last time there was beauty? But what else can these worlds that unfold on the backs of old grocery lists and discarded papers be called?

The beauty makes me wonder…What was I before you? Powerful. Hateful. Hated…. Ugly. But with fifteen years by your side, it's clear that apathy was never an option. The two of us were always destined for either love or hatred. Maybe it was never in my control. I believe that being exposed to a whole soul who could only see beauty irreparably changed the quality of who I am, was, and will be. Even so, I am changed. Metamorphosed. It seems entirely due to your influence that instead of hatred, I chose love.

Goodbye, little soul traveler. Goodbye, Harry Potter.

- "Little Soul Traveler" is seen in chapters 14 and 21 -

The Beginning of After

Chapter Summary

We toddle on toward the end woot woot ladies and gents

And I am sorry about killing Fred. For those wondering why, I'll say two things in my defense.

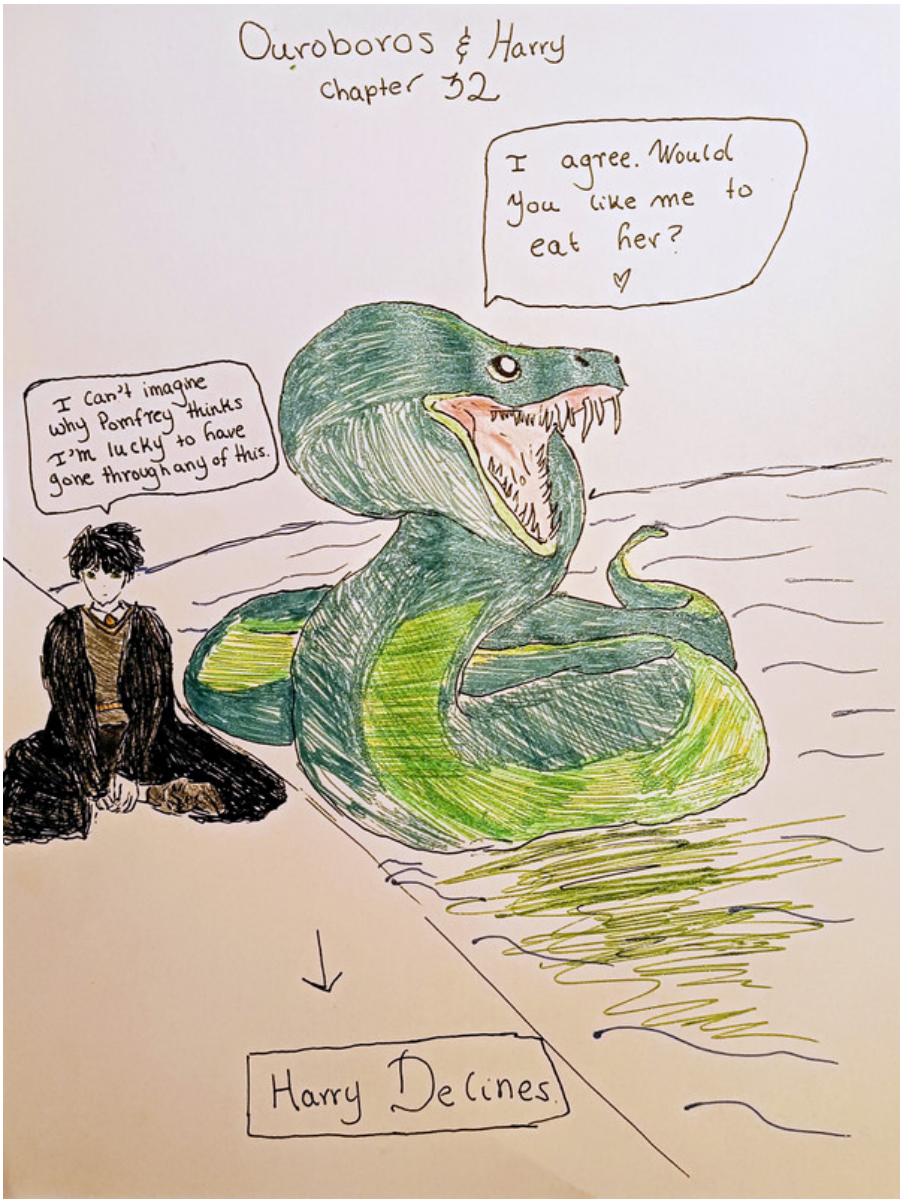
One) war is not the kind of thing everyone survives and Fred is brave enough and daring enough to be put in danger
Two) I disliked that in canon, his death was just something that happened but we never got to see the fallout and mourn for him as a lot of us would have wanted, so I kind of felt like he deserved to be noticed as much in dying as he was in life

PSA:

This chapter features a lot of grief

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes


Ouroboros & Harry
Chapter 32
I agree. Would you like me to eat her?
I can't imagine why Pomfrey thinks I'm lucky to have gone through any of this.
Harry Declines

So this one is mine. It's not the best thing ever, but since everyone is always wondering about my personal artistic talent, I thought it'd be fun to make you all something as we enter the finale. I even made a painting for next chapter. But er, yeah. This is my work. I don't think I'm giving Harry a run for his money, but I enjoyed myself and I think that's a big deal when all is said and done.

The end of the day passes in a blur. Harry enters the glass dome and sees the numerous injured. He bows his head. He didn't do enough to save everyone. Madame Pomfrey is crouched by Lavender Brown who looks like half her face has been bitten off. She's muttering, "We need to get her to St. Mungo's. They all need to go."

Ron calls out to everyone "It's over. Voldemort is dead."

Every person in the dome's head snaps toward Ron. It takes a moment for the news to sink in, for them to realize that everything is finally ended and that they're safe.

The ensuing cheer is deafening.

Harry can't stand all the questions of "What happened? How did Harry take him down?"

He turns and leaves the dome and waves goodbye to all the goblins as they return to their home. The goblin king raises his sword at Harry as he passes and Harry raises his wand in response.

Tom tucks Harry into his arms and says, quietly, "Never let yourself die again. Do you hear me, Harry? Never."

Harry jokes, "I survived the first three times I died. Why not make it a habit?"

Tom slams Harry into the wall of the dome. "It's not funny. Don't joke about that." His hands, digging into Harry's shoulders, are shaking.

Harry clasps his arms around Tom's back and hugs him close. "Okay. I'm sorry. I won't do it. Not ever again."

Tom says, "We haven't even gotten our kneazle yet."

Harry grips Tom's torn shirt in his hands. "Right, the kneazle. Need to get on that one."

Harry and Tom are forcibly sent to St. Mungo's by McGonagall. Harry notices that Tom has two new large scars on his shoulders when they're in the waiting room together.

"Where'd those come from?"

Tom says, "Voldemort kinda pinned me to a wall with some magic and I had Ouroboros get me out with his teeth."

"HE'S A DEADLY POISONOUS SNAKE! YOU COULD HAVE DIED!"

"WHO ARE YOU TO TALK? YOU LET YOURSELF GET HIT WITH A KILLING CURSE!"

"TO SAVE EVERYONE!"

"WELL, I DID IT TO SAVE YOU!"

That takes the wind out of Harry's sails and he collapses back against

the chair. “Alright, alright. Fair. Just – how did you survive the venom?”

“Fawkes came down and cried for me. He did the same thing for Snape.”

Harry says, “He must’ve been pretty sad that night.”

Tom says, “I think a lot of us were.”

Harry looks down at his ink-stained hands and remembers Voldemort’s soul as it shattered because there was not enough of it to root. “...It was a hard time.”

The healers come in and promptly yell about how Tom should be dead and ferry him away to a different room. They also make a big to-do over how Harry’s vitals are, “All over the place! The readings are saying that your soul capacity is more than double the normal limit!”

Harry touches a hand to his scar. “It’s not like I actually have that much soul, though, right?”

The healer says, “Your soul was split this morning, according to our readings. You lost just under half. But the thing is, souls can grow back. In a new book called “Soul Plasticity,” there’s a case study similar to yours. A man named Randy Barabus lost half his soul in a dueling accident but due to the immense love he and his wife shared, it grew past its original capacity. It seems likely that if you have even one person you love, your soul will recover.”

Harry quotes, “It was like I was sailing aimlessly over cold water

where nothing mattered and nothing existed, and she came out of the depths of a black ocean to become my anchor and my lighthouse. She made me remember what it felt like to come home."

The healer lights up. "You've read it!"

Harry remembers that day in the library. "I have."

The healer says, "The thing is, magic is tied to the soul. By all readings, it looks like you had the equivalent of almost two souls your whole life. With that doubling of magic, it's no wonder you make miracles."

***

After Harry and Tom are released from the hospital, they are beset upon by reporters. The news vultures all want to know exactly what happened and keep taking their photos. Tom takes off his cloak and covers Harry's head and walks the two of them through the throng to the apparition point. Without releasing Harry, he apparates the two of them back to Grimmauld.

Sirius is already there, helping students get back to their parents now that everything is over. Theodore Nott leaves with Blaise Zabini.

He says, matter of factly, "If Harry won, I assume my father is either dead or set for Azkaban."

When Harry and Tom return to their home, Sirius immediately stops what he's doing and bounds over to the two of them as a dog.

His tail wags excitedly and he nips at their ankles and follows them around the whole day, apparently too overcome with emotion to show his human face.

Tonks and her mother Andromeda and Remus take over helping coordinate all the kids and their returns to their families. Tonks lost her leg, but it will grow back. Remus lost an eye, but Tonks swears he looks great with an eye patch.

When Aunt Petunia sees Harry walk into the room she's using to do a bit of accounting prep work, she topples over her chair in her haste to get to Harry.

She raises a hand to Harry's face and a single tear falls down her cheek. She shakes herself slightly and then gently, like she doesn't how to hold him, pulls Harry into an embrace.

"Thank god," she whispers, "Thank everything in the world that you came back."

Harry melts into the hug. "I'm so tired," he says.

"So rest," she responds. "You've done so much, Harry. It's okay to rest a little."

In Petunia's arms, Harry realizes that he can't stay in the wizarding world for the rest of the year. When he looks into his soul, what once were smudge marks and graphite have turned into a brilliant collection of diamonds.

Pressure makes diamonds, he thinks.

Harry is nothing in darkness except cold stone. But with even one sliver of light, he'll shine brightly and bring every color into the world. Harry recalls the Horcrux saying, "You belong in the light."

Harry needs to be in the light, but he's always been in the light in the wizarding world. Little by little, the magic and wonder have been stripped away, and standing in Grimmauld's enchanted halls, Harry misses the simplicity of Privet Drive. He only existed in the darkness there. But maybe, maybe it would be different now and people loving him in spite of his magic, not because of it, is exactly what he needs.

"Can I – can we go home?" He asks Petunia.

She pulls back and stares at him. "Home? But aren't you…" she trails off and seems to come to a realization. "Your bedroom is waiting for you," she ends up saying.

Harry nods. "Right. Right then."

Harry takes the night to explain to Sirius and Tom that he needs time away from the wizarding world.

"I'll come back," he says to Tom, eyes soft and somber. "I'll always come back to you."

Tom clasps his back tight and whispers, "Then let me come with you. Or stay. Stay, Harry. I can't – you can't keep doing this to me. I won't allow it. I'll – I'll tie you to the bed.."

Harry says, “I’d untie myself. I’m pretty resourceful. But you can always come to visit. Me, that is. With apparition, I won’t be far away.”

“Visit?” Sirius says, “Why, I’ll be there every week. Maybe even every day.”

Tom leans down and kisses Harry. “Yes, expect me *constantly.”*

Harry says, “I wouldn’t have it any other way.”

***

Harry leaves with Aunt Petunia in her sensible Japanese car. A Toyota, it’s called. “How did they get it all the way here from Japan?”

“They shipped it, in parts, I think,” she answers.

They drive as London passes by slowly on the windows.

She asks, “Why did you want to drive with me instead of doing the teleport thing?”

Harry looks out at the grey morning, “I’m feeling a bit sick of magic at the moment.”

Petunia says, “That’s a hard one. It does such wonderful things but it can be used to do such terrible things.”

Harry feels like his hands are still stained with Voldemort's dying soul. "Sometimes I think magic's made me a bad person."

Petunia huffs. "When you were a toddler, you once carried a wounded cat all the way to a vet even though you hadn't eaten anything all day. Bad people don't do those things. You're not a bad person, Harry. Trust me on that one."

He rubs the back of his neck and avoids answering by asking, "What do people normally do in cars?"

"Talk, like this, I suppose. Ask about one another's days."

"How was your day, Aunt Petunia?"

"Surreal. Still is. But I am so happy that you are here."

The drive is fairly short, and when Harry is standing back in the familiar yet novel home, Petunia phones the home of Dudley's best friend. She explained that the term for his boarding school already ended but he's happily been spending the summer with his friend.

"He might want to go home though, now that you're here."

"Last time I saw him, I blew up his aunt."

Petunia smiles at the memory. "Marge had it coming."

Harry shrugs. “You’re not wrong.”

Petunia’s guess that Dudley may want to see Harry turns out to be an understatement. Dudley somehow manages to get back home by dinner. He throws open the front door and yells out, “Harry? Harry!!”

Harry’s sitting in the living room and he stands when Dudley enters the room.

“Hey, Big D.”

Dudley in the last few years has gone and shed all his fat and replaced it with sheer, powerful, rippling muscles. He crosses the room in seemingly three steps and lifts Harry clean off the ground. His arms are trembling. “I thought you were going to die. I thought you were dead, Harry. Thank god, you’re alive. You’re alive.”

In the arms of the cousin he once feared, Harry relaxes, and wonders for the first time since he woke in the clearing, if maybe it is a good thing that he’s here. That maybe his heart deserves to beat. It might be good, he thinks, to be alive.

“I’m back.”

Dudley sets him on the ground and gives Harry a small, tentative smile.

Harry finds himself smiling too. Something about Dudley, charming and uncomplicated Dudley, makes Harry feel cheerful. It feels like,

maybe, things will get better.

***

Harry returns to the wizarding once in the next year: he dons his mourning robes and comes to Fred's funeral. During the battle, Fred died fighting to help the injured make it to the dome. He is awarded posthumously with an order of the Merlin, first class. It's not enough.

In the days leading up to the funeral, George's entire family treats him like he's glass. He hears them crying and mourning whenever he is not around, but when he comes down the stairs, they all try to pull themselves together. He hates how gentle they are with him, how relentlessly soft and sweet they are. His whole family treats him with tenderness as if he's the only one allowed to mourn for Fred whenever he's in the room.

But that's wrong. Fred deserves everyone to mourn for him. He deserves the whole world to realize that the best thing it ever had is gone now.

Fred and George were always a unit. The longest they were ever apart was the five minutes between Fred being sorted and George being sorted. In those five minutes. Fred sat on the stool and George watched his brother intently, fearing they'd be separated. Those were the scariest five minutes of their lives.

Five minutes later, George walked to the Gryffindor table and Fred slid over with a wink. " *I was keeping this seat warm for you."*

That was the longest they'd ever been apart until Fred...passed on. George wants his whole family to talk about everything they miss with him but whenever he tries to talk about Fred, they all stop saying

anything and only listen.

On the day of the funeral, George finds himself next to a sniffling Ginny. When she sees him next to her, she makes a terrible face and tries to swallow all her tears. She angrily wipes her eyes. “Sorry. Sorry. I know this must be – so much harder for you.”

George grits his teeth. He has barely spoken for the last week. But he needs to speak now. He’s not the only person grieving. George’s voice comes out as a quiet croak. “I knew him better than you, Gin. That doesn’t mean – that doesn’t mean you loved him any less than I did.”

She slips her hand into his as they watch Fred be lowered into the ground. Ron is sobbing into Harry’s shirt and Harry has trained his eyes to the sky. “No,” she agrees quietly, “I guess that's true.”

***

After the funeral, Harry returns to Privet Drive and Tom goes back to a mostly empty Grimmauld. Kreacher moves out in order to help support some house-elves who lost their homes during the war and in order to hang out with Petunia and Harry most days. Sirius is out many days helping with the rebuilding of Hogwarts effort. At first, they almost call Harry to remove the glass dome, but McGonagall says, “Keep it. It will make Quidditch so much more interesting. And it will be a good bit of history.”

Snape helps give testimony at the trials for the Death Eaters in custody and helps argue Lucius Malfoy into house arrest. When he’s done his part, he leaves Tom an old potions book with a letter that says, “For Harry, whenever he wants it.”

After that, he leaves and heads off to Germany to become a potioneer

far away from everyone.

Tom stays in Grimmauld with Ron sometimes, Hermione sometimes, and Sirius sometimes when the man isn't working, and all the time with George Weasley because they're both missing pieces of themselves and find solace in the quiet.

They talk sometimes, about who they might have been if things were different.

George says, once, wistful, "I might have been happy."

And Tom says, "You might still be."

George shakes his head and says, "Happiness will never be the same, even if I get there someday."

And then Geoge looks at Tom expectantly, as if he wants to share all his inner thoughts like some kind of vulnerable school child.

Except Tom almost does want to share his thoughts, Weasley be damned, so Tom muses, "If things were different, I might be an even worse Dark Lord than the one we 'vanquished' or whatever."

And then George snorts and says, "You still might be."

And Tom leans back against a wall that he once thought was a hideous shade of red but now adores so thoroughly he'll never tell anyone and replies, "being a Dark Lord will never be the same for me, now that I know just how much it ruins everything."

And there's nothing to say to that, to the self-loathing they both hold in their hearts for being young and daring and surviving when people they loved fell.

So George raises his tea cup and says, "Well then, I guess that's growth."

And Tom closes his eyes and allows himself to imagine for just one moment that Harry is sitting beside him, green eyes open and unburdened, Sirius yelling at Kreacher in the kitchen to make tea and feels his heart *ache* and then he says, "I suppose it is."

***

Pansy Parkinson toasts Hermione Granger in a muggle pub and says, "It was one in seven. Kids who died, that is. One in seven Hogwarts kids who were there died. Feels callous when you say it that way, of course. Just makes Crabbe and Weasley a statistic. That doesn't make it any less true."

Hermione leans back and thinks of Fred and Colin Creevey and "No," she agrees, "it doesn't."

***

Lavender Brown gets coffee with Trelawney. After an official inquiry, Trelawney claims that she had one night of being a true prophet but that her "inner eye works at all times and you're all going to win the muggle lottery!" The ministry lets her go claiming her inconsistency would be a liability to their pursuits.

Lavender's face could not be saved entirely, and although she lives, she has a large bite-mark that covers all the features that used to make her beautiful.

"You knew, didn't you?" She asks. The ministry may have been fooled, but Lavender's always believed in her divination professor's ability to see the future.

Trelawney says, "I did."

Lavender says, "Then why – why didn't you – why did you let me end up like this? I can't – I can't – I hate this. I hate how scared I get. I hate that I remember what it felt like for some sicko man to try and *eat me while I'm alive.* If you knew, how could you let that happen?"

Trelawney passes Lavender a tissue with glassy eyes. "The thing is, sometimes knowing the future doesn't mean you can change it. I did… the absolute best that I could."

Lavender dabs at her eyes and tries to ignore the jagged teeth marks on her skin.

Trelawney places one of her hands on Lavender's. "What happened to you will never be okay, but with time, you will be okay. You'll be okay, Lavender."

This, more than anything she's ever said before, feels like a true prophecy.

***

The morning after the funeral, George turns to his side to tell Fred a joke. He chokes on his breath when he remembers that he can't. Fred is dead.

George gets up. He drinks a cup of his mum's tea. He pretends to eat breakfast and responds to letters of people asking him how he's doing. He gets so fed up at one point he just starts writing, "Shit," and sending them off.

Some of his old friends from school come visit and won't stop crying the whole time, talking about how awful it is that Fred is dead and how George must be so sad.

Jordan Lee stands in front of George and yells, "Oi! Do you want him to comfort you or something? Shut the fuck up about this."

George says, "Thanks, Jordan," and looks at his old friend. Jordan is clearly grieving deeply but he clasps George's hand with strength.

"Anytime, George. What are friends for?"

***

Beatrice Haywod and Cedric Diggory form a game-night group with Tom and George and Hermione and Ron. They get piss drunk once a week and then try their best to make muggle board games magical. After a while, Draco Malfoy, Ginny, Pansy Parkinson, and Millicent Bulstrode join in. Sometimes they talk about the war. Sometimes Hermione gives them pamphlets about PTSD. Most of the time they try to enchant Cards Against Humanity Cards to do some incredibly obscene things.

Tom visits Harry every other day and spends the night in the cramped bed on Privet Drive. He can tell that family is doing a world of good for Harry. Tom understands, Sirius has done a world of good for him.

Harry is also working on something and he won't tell Tom anything about it. Tom maybe waits until Harry's asleep and then reads Petunia's mind to learn about the project, but he pretends to not know anything, and that's what makes Harry happy.

***

Harry spends ten months with the Evans at Privet Drive. Petunia keeps buying things for him, like pillows and sweets and game consoles Harry does not know how to use. Dudley introduces Harry to all his friends.

They spend the summer going to the cinema. In December, they go watch Titanic 16 times together. Harry always cries when the boat starts to sink and he says to Dudley, every time, "I hate icebergs."

After the twelfth time Harry says this, Dudley responds, "You're ridiculous."

Tom and Sirius come to Petunia's for Christmas and they all spend the day together. Tom kisses Harry under the mistletoe Kreacher sets up and tells him he'll be waiting for Harry to come back for as long as it takes.

When they go up to Harry's room, Tom pulls Harry down onto his lap and kisses his neck. "If you decide that you can't ever come back, I'll let it all go for you," he says. "I just need you."

Harry turns himself so he's straddling Tom. "I'll be back," he says, "I told you, I'll always come back to you."

They kiss on the first snow of the year.

***

Aunt Petunia and Dudley give Harry Vernon's old office to be his studio, and he owl-orders paint, and he spends most of his days making portraits of the dead using the resurrection stone. By seeing all the layers of people from the beginnings of their lives to their ends, he chooses the moments where they are happiest to capture. Sometimes, with the adults that died, that means painting them as children.

He chats with Dumbledore once about why on earth he was able for a time to bring paintings into the real world and put Voldemort's soul into a painting.

"That last one, I imagine, is because for a while you housed a piece of his soul. Your magic recognized both you and the diary as being places to house Voldemort. And bringing things into the real world, who knows? You're the only soul-seer to have ever held two souls. Hard to know what a side-effect of two souls could be."

Harry nods and throws himself back into painting the fallen.

Aunt Petunia comes in to bring him lunch if he forgets, and Dudley brings dinner.

There's a strong kind of easy love that brews between the three of them. (Maybe it's always been there, buried underneath the fear.)

Aunt Petunia rages about all the hardships Harry's had to endure and writes strongly worded howlers she sends to almost half of Wizarding Britain.

Dudley says, every day, "I'm glad you're here."

And Harry paints and paints and paints. He says, sometimes, "Me too."

There was a childhood Harry spent in this house, trying to be anyone other than himself, working for scraps of affection from his relatives, fighting to remain, and regretting being alive.

And there's the beginning of adulthood here too. With a family that loves him, a cousin who wants to see his magic. He's learning to live in the same house that taught him to hide.

And he thinks that maybe healing had to happen here. Because he isn't just getting ready to go back to a world of magic. He's learning that some things weren't his fault and healing scars that go back more than a decade. His little family of two, regret written so deep into the ink of their hearts it might as well be its own colour, heals with him.

So when he finishes his last painting and wants to go back to the world of magic, he wishes both Aunt Petunia and Dudley all the best.

Dudley says he'll write and then Aunt Petunia demands, "You come to visit, at least once a month, hear? You can bring Tom and Sirius and whoever else for all I care, but you come visit, hear?"

So Harry salutes and says, "I hear."

And Dudley and Aunt Petunia wrap their arms around him and say, “This will always be your home.”

Aunt Petunia whispers, “You have two worlds, Harry. Both want you.”

So Harry is smiling and crying a bit when he apparates ten months after the war straight into Tom’s arms, and Tom, like the man he is, catches him.

***

Eleven months after the battle of Hogwarts, Harry stands and presents a memorial. On winding walls, he has painted portraits of all the children that died, in both wars.

There are too many paintings to count. There’s a lake of clear water and children playing on the beach. There are girls who stand on mountains with setting suns and dresses that billow in the gentle breeze. There are boys climbing fruit trees and tossing down red apples to their friends below, the sweet smell of flowers and fresh juice drifting across memory.

There’s laughter and tears and so many people, so many *children* all with stars in their eyes and innocence wrapped around them like blankets made of gentle warmth.

Molly Weasley begins crying when she sees three red-haired boys cackling on broomsticks, beating a bludger around for sport. They hear her tears start and begin to wave, Fabian and Gideon Prewet, sixteen and still full of the spirit of mischief they never lost, Fred Weasley grinning between them.

He's almost painfully young, the adolescent in the painting, still filled with that endless wonder and undying hope, he's painted right before the final battle at just eighteen. He had one moment where he felt invincible and playful, and that's the moment Harry captures.

When George sees the painting, he nods his head, says "yep, of course Harry got our nose straight-on," kisses his mum on the cheek and says, "I think that one's yours,"

He walks right out of the ceremony. It's one thing to know Fred is gone. It's another thing to see it.

Harry paints his parents in the Gryffindor common room with Alice and Frank, Neville's parents who were tortured to insanity. The four of them are expecting parents in the paintings and a little scared but overjoyed at the prospect of having kids. After the memorial ends, Neville introduces himself the portrait versions of his parents and they can't stop glowing about how well he's grown up.

Harry lets Neville walk away with the painting so he can get a chance to meet his parents, or at the very least, learn who they used to be. Neville isn't sure at first if he should take it even though he clearly wants to, "it's got your parents too."

Harry gives Neville a playful shove. "It just means I'll have a reason to visit."

On the day Harry presents the memorial, everyone watches the children as they run from one frame to the next, Collin Creevey running around with a camera and Myrtle Warren giggling as another girl braids her hair.

As much as Harry wants to paint *his* Tom, the one who he's loved since he was thirteen and didn't know what it meant, he doesn't. He paints the Tom Riddle who never split his soul, who's never even considered immortality because the second world war hasn't started.

He paints a nine-year-old Tom Riddle in a garden filled with roses, asphodel, and blooming camellias. There's a maze crafted between the shade of hibiscus trees. There's grass that blankets the ground and the kind of dirt you want to stick your hands into until they come out with fresh clay. He paints Tom into that portrait with a ten-year-old Merope Gaunt.

Tom Riddle is lonely, hateful, and manipulative. Merope is manipulative, hateful, and lonely. He flinches from memories of the orphanage. She flinches at memories of her father and uncle. They hiss at each other for a full month before they realize they are both speaking in parseltongue. Some days they complain they hate each other. Some days they refuse to speak at all. Most days Tom lies down with his head in Merope's lap and they speak together in the language of serpents, a reminder that they have -- that they are -- family.

Harry introduces the memorial: "I just want to start by saying that this – this is the last time I will ever speak as Harry Potter, the boy who lived. After today, if you wish to reach me you can contact my office if you wish to commission a painting.

But enough of me, today is about all the people in these portraits. These are the children who we lost in this war. If you look at all these children and young adults, you should know that every last one of them were heroes and none of them should have been. We should have been children and instead, we spent our childhoods fearing for our lives. There are Slytherins on these walls and there are muggle-borns and purebloods. If we do not change, the number of portraits I need to paint will only grow. Their deaths are the legacy we're leaving behind. So I charge us all to do better. We need to make sure this never happens again. I know it's hard to believe, but I promise, we are

worth more than our blood and the trimmings on our robes."

***

Blaise Zabini speaks at the memorial and says, "I didn't fight. I didn't want to. And that doesn't make me a coward. I was just sixteen and it's okay for a teenager to be scared. To everyone who didn't fight, you deserve to feel proud."

Draco Malfoy speaks and says, "I knew for a long time that what was going on was wrong, but choosing to fight was almost impossible. I understand putting your family first.

Aunt Petunia speaks as well, Harry giving her charms so she can come to the event. "My sister is in one of these portraits. Her name was Lily Evans, or Potter by the end, I guess. She was twenty one years old when she was murdered. She was here for just a moment. Twenty one years isn't a very long time when all is said and done. There are so many children here that didn't even get that long. People like her, people like all these brave souls, they don't come around very often. They're like falling stars, flashing across the sky. The world will never look as bright as it did when she was in it. I will mourn for longer than I knew her, but still, she was here. She was. They all were. And then they were gone."

Historians will later cite Petunia's quote and Harry's memorial as the reason behind the centuries of peace in Britain.

***

Even after walking out of the memorial, George does not forget a single person he knew.

And he, like the rest of the wizarding world, keeps going. He helps his parents pay their bills with all the profit he makes from his shop. He goes to game nights and starts bringing Angelina along. He groans when Harry and Tom are needlessly PDA, all the time.

He and Angelina go to every single home game Ginny plays with the Hollyhead Harpies and learn to tolerate Draco Fucking Malfoy, of all people.

He and Angelina get married.

They have children: two twin girls with shockingly bright red hair. He names them Roxanna and Myla, but their middle names are Gred and Forge because they should wear the names with pride and remember their barmy uncle the way he was: ridiculous, lovable, and forever young.

***

Sometimes George dreams of Fred. He can never remember the dreams in the morning, but he always feel warmer and better rested on those nights. All he has are flashes of red and a crooked-half grin.

Sometimes, he thinks he hears Fred saying, "Take all the time you need. I'll be up here, keeping your seat warm."

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter features kneazles, children, and the moment I literally based this entire fic on. Get ready.

If you have any last fanart you want submitted, please email it to maytal.w.booth@gmail.com and include how you want to be credited, like a tumblr name or real name or a03 usernames.

Please leave a kudos or comment if you feel so inclined. This is your penultimate chance
:)

Epilogue: Legacy

Chapter Summary

I can't believe that I made it to this point. There are parts of this story I like better than others, and this ending isn't perfect, but please know I have given this my absolute best.

It's kind of making me choked up that this is over. I spent more than two years writing this and I can't believe this chapter of my life is coming to a close.

Still, I'm excited to write my next fic. Spoiler alert: it won't be angsty. I'm feeling a bit happier now compared to when I first started writing.

And better yet, we made it! To everyone who hopped on recently or who's been here since the get-go, we did it! We came to the end and I couldn't be more grateful for all of you.

PSA:

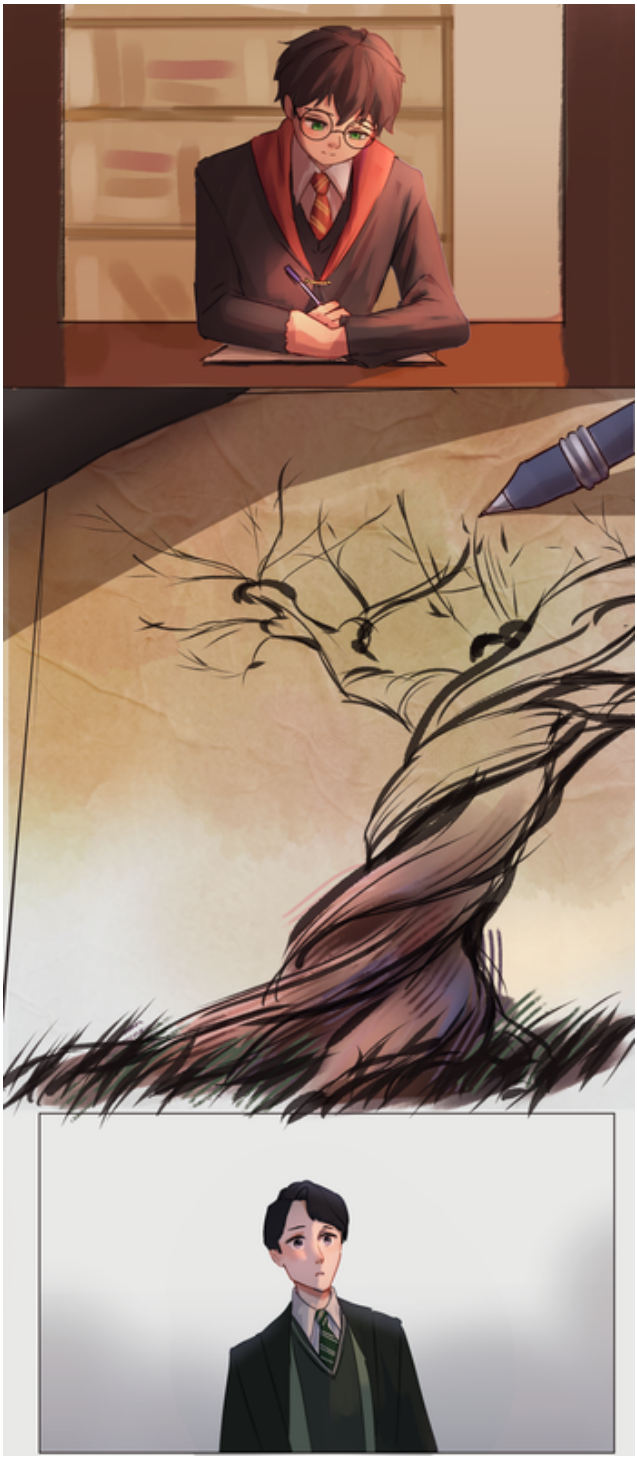
Some mild discussion of abuse

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The painting above was done by moi. It was a bit of an ode to Harry painting a tree at the lake and the first bit of color (in this case a hint of blue) coming into an otherwise monochrome world. It ain't the best thing ever, but here, a painting for you.

This mind-blowing world-building masterpiece was crafted by TNata. I loved how it looks like Harry is writing in a world that is inverse to Tom's. The art style is so charming and believable. The way the colors of the common room and fire are reflected in Tom's horizon is so cohesive. I love it and am humbled by it.



This stunning collection of masterpieces was made by R.A. This is an incredible look back at the first chapter. There's so much detail in every piece, like the shadow of Harry's arm on the diary, the crinkles of the paper, Tom's expression of shock. I cannot think of a better final piece of art for this work.

To everyone who has submitted fanart over the course of this fic, thank you.

They get the Kneazle first. Tom and Kreacher go shopping together and select the very best-looking one of the bunch from Miss Figg.

The Kneazle they select is incredibly well-manicured, with yellow fur and bright green jade eyes. She is fluffy in a pleasing way, and somewhat arrogant.

When Tom brings her back to Harry, she sits in Tom's arms uncomfortably and gives both him and Kreacher obvious once-overs.

When Tom sets her down in Grimmauld place, she explores thoroughly, sticking her nose into every item. She makes her way up to the attic where Harry is busy painting a dragon molting against a sunset.

When she sees Harry, he totally ignores her, utterly absorbed in his work. She falls in love with him at once and spends the day attacking Harry’s feet and steeling his paint brushes.

Tom watches the whole thing with arms crossed, concerned Harry will decide he does not need any Kneazles (and Tom) due to the distraction.

Instead, Tom finds Harry wrestling the feline on the floor, spots of paint on both his cheeks and her fur, laughing hysterically.

Harry's laughs are a rare thing following the war, and Tom leaves the room well-satisfied.

They name the Kneazle Helga and she and Hedwig get into tussles all the time.

Tom interviews for the defense post.

McGonagall says, "No one has ever lasted more than a year. I know He-who-must-not-be– sorry, Voldemort, is gone, but we haven't seen yet if that will make a difference to the curse. I would hate to place any former student of mine in a dangerous position. I realize the irony given the war and whatnot, but I do mean that."

Tom takes off his glasses and slides them into his pocket. There's no reason to hide his face any longer. "I am more than willing to take the risk."

McGonagall sighs. "The post is yours come September, then. Your work with the defense club more than qualifies you, in my opinion. Get a mastery at some point. Until then, I suppose you can rest. I imagine you need it."

Tom feels a disbelieving smile spread across his face. He gets to teach at Hogwarts, his first true home. He will get to meet brilliant young minds and shape them. He means to say something dignified but what comes out is, "Really? Oh, thank Merlin."

McGonagall laughs at him. “Thank me instead. I’m the one giving you a job.”

Tom coughs. “Right. Thank you.”

McGonagall shoos him out of her office with a, “You’re welcome.”

When he comes home that night, he catches Harry around his waist and spins him around. “I got the job!”

From slightly down the hall, he hears Sirius scream, “YOU GOT THE JOB!!! CONGRATULATIONS!!”

Harry’s eyes sparkle and he tucks his legs behind Tom’s back. “Good. There’d be no one better than you.”

They have a feast for dinner and after, when Harry and Tom are tucked together on an ottoman, Harry says, “So, I’ve been looking at cottages.”

Tom picks up Harry’s hand and kisses his pulse point. “Have you?”

Harry squirms slightly. “It’s just that, with all the commissions I’ve been making, I think we could afford one. We could afford six or seven if I’m honest.”

Tom kisses up Harry’s arm to his neck. “I trust you. Pick somewhere

you like."

Harry pulls Tom's face up for a kiss. "Okay," he says. "Okay."

The cottage they move to is a Tudor-style one at the outskirts of Hogsmeade. There's a large backyard with a brook running through and a sweeping lawn.

Tom takes one look at it and says, "It's perfect."

Helga hides under the couch for the first day but comes around after she sees Hedwig happily flying around.

As a housewarming present, Luna gifts them a statue of a magpie's bottom. "It's good luck," she tells them seriously. She made it through the war but due to the cruciatus, she has a persistent tremor. It doesn't seem to bother her very greatly. "Steady hands mean a lot less to me and my dad than life."

On one game night, Harry just feels sad. There's no reason for it. He's been doing well, making lots of paintings and even more amounts of money, but these things come and go in waves. He finds himself looking into Hermione's soul in an attempt to get away from looking at his own.

Hermione charms her card to transform into a floating man made of meatloaf and then out of her meatloaf man's bum, another meatloaf pops forth.

She and Harry say, with the same smile at the same time, "*For my next trick, I will pull* **meatloaf the food** *out of* **meatloaf the man.**"

Hermione turns to stare at Harry in concern. Harry doesn't much care for her concern and focuses on Ron. Ron and Harry say, "You always get so lucky for the pick-twos!"

George says, "Harry?"

Harry? He does look a bit peaky. "Mate," says Harry with him, "You doing alright?"

Harry doesn't respond. Ron feels progressively more confused. Does he exist twice?

Luna cuts in, "Harry? Do you know where you are?"

Harry continues to stare blankly ahead and Ron worries about him. Tom shakes his head and says, "That will be enough of that."

He slides his hand over Harry's eyes. Harry hears as if from very far away, "Come now, come back to me love."

But he can't love Tom, he's Ron and he loves Hermione, right?

Harry feels himself being pulled against a firm chest and a whisper of breath in his ear. He comes back to his own feet slowly, focusing on Tom's hand over his eyes and the feel of Tom's heartbeat against his back.

When he finally remembers who he is and where his soul ends and everyone elses' begin, he turns into Tom's chest and begins to sob.

Tom strokes his hand up and down Harry's spine. "Shh, you're okay. Sweetheart."

Harry shakes his head. He says, "Sorry guys, I know – this is so – embarrassing."

Hermione makes a wounded noise. "Harry, we're all struggling. This is normal. Is there anything in particular bothering you?"

Harry says, "I don't know. I just felt sad today."

Tom manages to get Harry to sit down once more and Harry turns to face the group with puffy eyes. "Shouldn't I be better by now? It's been a year already. Shouldn't I … dunno… feel okay now?"

Ginny smacks Harry lightly. "None of us are okay, stop trying to feel like you should be special."

Draco nudges Ginny's shoulder and says, "Yes, Potter. Your days of being the saviour are over and now you must deal with awful emotions like the rest of us humans."

Harry wipes his eyes and loses game night terribly. He's still sad for the next few days, but he and Ron go flying together and that makes the world seem a bit brighter.

***

The next five years are filled with too many marriages to count. Harry and Tom marry quietly in the winter with only Sirius and the Weasleys and their significant others in attendance. If they'd invited even one more person, it would have become a state-wide affair.

As it stands, their quiet wedding is written about for six months after it happens with many wondering about the meaning behind the sapphire rings Tom and Harry share.

"Are the sapphires meant to strengthen intuition?"

"Are they a nod to how Harry Potter and Tom Black are our modern version of Royalty?"

The truth is that the goblins ask Harry and Tom for their favorite gemstones, they both answer sapphire, and the goblins send them the rings as a wedding gift.

The wedding is in the Geneva Black manor, and Draco reads a speech filled with all the warnings he wrote to Harry back when he thought Tom was evil. Draco clears his throat and says, "He'll kill you Harry, and he'll enjoy it. He'll skin you alive and wear your hide like it's fashionable. He'll bleed your children dry and make you watch." Draco pauses dramatically as everyone laughs. Then, with a flourish and a little bow, he continues: "But I suppose it's worth saying that despite his being a psychopath, to the extent that he is able, he will love you for the rest of your life."

They drink a merry toast to that.

Remus Lupin and Nymphadora Tonks marry next. Sirius is Remus' best man and a year later, when Nymphadora is pregnant, she asks Sirius to be the godfather. Sirius agrees and he is present in Teddy's life the whole way through, stone-cold sober and loving every second.

Ginny and Draco marry very publicly and spend lots of money on every last detail. While a few people yell out "Death Eater" when Draco says his vows, most people congratulate the two of them for being the best-looking couple maybe ever.

Ginny's wedding dress, which reportedly cost a million galleons, tops lists around the world as the best dress ever worn. As a nod to the dress robes she wore to the Yule ball with Draco, white diamond butterflies adorn the gown, flapping their sparkling wings and creating rainbows everywhere Ginny moves.

When George marries Angelina, he asks Lee Jordan to be his best man. Molly cries hardest at that wedding out of all the weddings of her children, but she smiles the whole time too.

Hermione and Ron marry last. It takes Ron six years to convince Hermione's parents that he's worthy of her, and it takes Hermione six years to convince herself that she has time to get married. "There's just so much to do! I'm helping re-house the elves, running for office, and helping re-design the great hall. I don't have time to plan a wedding!"

In the end, Molly says, "I'll plan it! I'll plan everything so just show up and get married already! Merlin."

And Molly does plan it, and it is beautiful, and all the Grangers in attendance love every second, right down to the sugar-free cake that tastes delightful because of, well, magic.

***

Ari joins their house first. By this point, Harry and Tom are well into their thirties. Under Tom's leadership, Hufflepuff has won the last eight house cups. Other houses complain that the Hufflepuffs who have Tom as their head of house act more like Slytherins than actual Slytherins.

"They're nice about it, sure, but they're cunning underneath that loyalty. They're way too terrifying."

One student tells the daily prophet, "Tom Black has a Basilisk as a pet. He calls him Ouroboros and all the Hufflepuffs pet the beast and love him and say he's a sweetheart. Harry Potter comes by sometimes to visit the snake. Why does this not concern anyone else? This is abnormal Hufflepuff behaviour! "

No one can ever be too mad about the Slytherin tint to Hufflpeuff because Tom is nearly everyone's favorite teacher, although Neville is beloved amongst the kids who love herbology.

Harry gets a letter from Petunia one night.

Dear Harry,

There's a child in foster care on the block. His foster parents are having a rough time with him. They think he's evil somehow. I'm guessing it's magic. He was removed from his last home for abuse I heard and his current foster home is about to send him back to a group home. I know it may be early, but you've talked about adopting. He could probably use a home. If you don't feel comfortable taking him on, I might be getting older, but I'll do it.

Love,

Petunia

Harry talks to Tom that night over the fireplace and Tom says, “Go get him. I’ll be back over the weekend.”

Harry goes back to Grimmauld and chats with Sirius about how Sirius is about to become an uncle and Sirius says, “You’re going to change that boy’s life.”

Harry thinks of having someone he loves entirely unconditionally and says, “With luck, he’ll change mine too.”

Harry meets Ari the next morning. Harry’s dressed in a simple blue sweater and jeans.

He convinces the muggles raising Ari that he’s been cleared by the state to come and take Ari, if they don’t want him any longer.

“He’s a right handful,” the muggle woman states. “He keeps messing with the television and we don’t know how.”

The muggle man sniffs, “We were only hoping to be temporary guardians anyhow. If you want him, he’s all yours.”

Harry is led to a small bedroom where a six-year-old boy is swinging his legs angrily on his bed. He gives Harry a judgmental stare.

“Are you supposed to be the person who takes me away?”

Harry sits down non-threateningly on the floor in front of the bed. From this height, he is much shorter than Ari. “If you would like, I would be happy to take you all the way home with me. We’re alike you see, and I would very much like to have you in my family.”

Ari looks at Harry. “You’re weird.”

Harry nods amicably. “Very much so.”

Ari says, “How are we, em, similar?”

Harry takes out his wand and makes a small firework in the room. Ari stares transfixed. “We’re both a bit on the magical side of things. I, like you, was raised by some people who didn’t understand. But I promise you, Ari, I and my partner will understand and we’d love to have you.”

Ari nods and says nothing else. By the end of the day, he’s home at the cottage and set up in a children’s room.

The next few weeks are referred to by all members of the Potter Black Weasley family as the dark ages. Ari seems to take offense to everything.

“I hate peas!”

“Try some spinach, then.”

“I hate spinach.”

“Have some ice cream then.”

“I HATE ICE CREAM.”

He refuses to do his homework, he refuses to take baths, and he refuses to try out the children’s broomstick Harry buys him.

At the end of three weeks, Tom is leaving home to go back to Hogwarts as the weekend is over, and he asks Ari if he’d like to come.

Ari grumbles but comes along.

He sits quietly during the defense lessons and absorbs everything with wide eyes. He allows Tom to sit next to him as they eat together at the high table. He giggles when older girls coo at how cute Professor Black’s son is.

When the day is over and Ari is about to be picked up by Harry, he asks quietly, “Is that what I am to you guys? Your son?”

Tom remembers wishing over and over that someone would take him home from the orphanage and be someone big, important, and who loved him. “Yes, that’s what you are to us. Our beloved son.”

Carefully, Tom tries to give Ari a hug. Every other time he's done this, Ari has rejected the affection. Ari allows it and hesitantly raises his arms to clasp Tom's back.

He settles in after that and is just the sassy and adorable addition the family needs.

Elias joins them next, one year later. Harry is taking a walk with Ari and Dudley and hears rumours of a ghost in Dorking. Harry follows the rumour and finds a little four-year-old boy scared mute and kept in a shed outside the home of people Harry never meets but does call the muggle authorities upon.

He brings the boy directly to St. Mungo's and then after he's been healed, takes him home. He does not care if the child is magical or not.

Elias takes to Harry immediately. He wants cuddles before bed and demands hugs and wants to be carried all the time. He likes to sit on Harry's lap when Harry paints and toddle around after Ari whenever Harry is busy. He is also clearly a magical child to the extent that he can break down any charmed protections on food when he wants cookies.

He likes Tom too, and tugs on Tom's sleeves whenever Tom is home hoping to be read a story. It takes half a year for Elias to begin speaking and when he does, he does so very quietly. They've been calling him Junior as a defacto name for the whole time he's been part of the family.

The first thing he says is, "I'm Elias."

Immediately after that, everyone calls him Elias or El-man and they move on. Elias begins to become more interested in hanging out with Ari and at first, Harry fields many complaints of, “Elias came into my room,” and “Ari doesn’t want to play with me,” but after enough versions of Harry saying, “That’s hard,” or, “Okay then,” and only stepping in to stop one child from hitting the other, they seem to pull through. Ari still gets mad at Elias and Elias still annoys Ari, but they begin flying on kid broomsticks together and giggling maniacally in the way that boys do.

Lily joins their family last. When she is six years old her pureblood family tosses her out the window of their two-story home hoping to see some accidental magic. Instead, her mangled body is brought to St. Mungo’s where her life is saved, but barely.

Healer Lavender Brown calls the authorities on her family for child abuse. She sets out some feelers to see if anyone in the wizarding world wants to adopt the girl. Standard procedure dictates that if she goes to the muggle world, all her memories need to be wiped. But no one wants to take a squib.

Despite the abuse she’s suffered, Lavender feels uncomfortable taking every memory away from a child like that. She ends up calling Harry Potter in.

“I know you have your hands full with your two kids so I’m not asking you to adopt her, it’s just that Harry Potter suggesting for someone to adopt a squib would do a world of good for her, you know?”

Harry scoops up Lily and says, “I think actually she will be coming home with me. Thank you, Lavender.”

Lily wakes up very warm and comfortable in a large blue-toned

bedroom with stars in the sky. Tom and Harry explain to her very gently what happened and that they may be wizards but they want her very much.

She flinches at first and then slowly comes out of her shell. She ends up asking Harry after she loves him and knows he loves her back, “Could you name me? I don’t like being called for who I was…before.”

He says, “Would you like to be called Lily? It’s for your grandmother.”

Lily shakes and says, “I don’t think grandmothers like me very much.”

Harry pulls Lily into his lap and says, “Nonsense. Grandma Weasley likes you very much.”

“Grandma Weasley’s *different* .”

“Aunt Petunia and Cousin Dudley love you to death.”

“They’re muggles.”

“Well, your Grandma Lily was Aunt Petunia’s sister and she’d have loved you to death too. In fact, I’m sure she does.”

Lily mulls it over and says, after a while, “Okay. Lily it is then.”

She gets along well with her brothers. She and Elias are the same age and they play all sorts of tricks on Ari, like baking him cookies that

look like worms or convincing Helga to rub her fur all over his bed. He gets them back by being taller than them and more self-assured. He also sometimes throws paper airplanes at their heads.

The cottage is warm and the family that Tom and Harry build inside it is beautiful. Their children play with Angelina and George's, Hermione and Ron's, and Cedric and Cho's children and they all get along.

Harry, Ron, and Hermione stay close for the rest of their lives. There are some friendships, like the ones made because of taking down a troll, that simply never end. The game-night group over time becomes another kind of enduring friendship. They are the ones who fought and survived wars together. Bonds like that are hard to break.

Once per month at least, Harry and Tom take the children to Petunia's house and she screams when the kids present her with various magical items and then spends hours and hours doting on them after she gets over her fear.

Dudley and his kids love Harry's children, so Harry and Dudley and Tom will share a beer and watch the kids run around together.

"I wouldn't have thought we'd end up friends like this when I was a kid," Dudley says one summer evening.

Harry says, "Me neither."

"It's better though. This. It's better than whatever I thought we'd end up like back then."

Ari throws a ball of mud at Dudley's son, James, and James responds by tackling Ari. Elias and Lily run to tackle James off of Ari and end up only adding to the weight. Dudley's tiny two-year-old daughter giggles on the side.

Harry lays his head on Tom's shoulder. "This is truly so much better."

***

When Aunt Petunia is getting on in years, sixty years old and slightly terrified of the magical children who invade her home monthly even though she would never have it any other way thank you very little, Harry asks if he can paint her. He hasn't painted a single portrait since the memorial, but he wants to paint her. He wants to paint the beautiful inky soul who lived a life much harder than she had imagined when she was a child with pale spotless cheeks and a beautiful, living, little sister. He asks her if she'd like to be a portrait. She says no. She says that she doesn't think her adult self would enjoy being in a portrait. "I have too many regrets" she tells him," there's too much grief, written into the fabric of my soul."

"But Harry," she tells him, "There is someone who would love to be painted by you."

She looks at her mantle where there is a picture of thirteen-year-old Petunia with her arms around eleven-year-old Lily.

***

Petunia Evans is painted into a portrait full of fireflies and an unfenced lake house with humidity hanging heavy in the summer air, damp grass glistening with the morning's thunderstorm.

When she was thirteen years old she became a casualty of a different war, one where children were told there was a world of magic -- real magic -- and they were not special enough to be invited. She was told that she was not powerful enough to go to that shining and scary new world with her little sister. Her spirit was poisoned in a casualty of regard and self-importance that was no less damaging than any other.

So thirteen years old, with no regrets and no grief in her soul, the girl who would one day become Aunt Petunia comes to Hogwarts in her summer portrait. She has bare feet and a jar full of fireflies.

The fat lady wants to retire to a life with Sir Greggory and the school needs a replacement.

Petunia becomes the portrait in charge of the Gryffindor common room. She learns everybody's names and loves to help them study because she wants to learn all she can. She is steadfast in allowing ONLY Gryffindors in, and will never bend for any reason. (Tom would have hated her.) She brags about her younger sister who went to Gryffindor, the younger sister who's drawn so much older and sometimes visits, walking across frames all the way from Longbottom manor to get to Hogwarts. Her sister comes to visit every Tuesday at midday, in fact.

She is beloved, that thirteen-year-old girl with bare feet and eyes reflecting the glow of year-round summer. Her dress flutters in the wind, her hair drips often from her dips in the lake.

She's the best and final portrait of a person Harry Potter ever paints; this beautiful little girl with dreams as bright as stars. She's fiery and brilliant and witty and joyful and loving and… she finally gets to live her dream. She's a pioneer, Petunia Evans, the first muggle to ever go to Hogwarts.

—

Harry grew up in a world where Slytherins were vilified, where children were kept out or put down because of their blood, where fear clung to classrooms and schools turned into battlegrounds. War robbed Tom and Harry both of childhood.

Harry never teaches his children how to fight wars. He teaches his children how to paint, fingers stained with pigment and mouths straining with grins. He teaches them how to bake and how to sneak cookie dough when their fathers aren't watching them. He teaches them how to say, "I love you," and they say it to each other and their parents every day. And they hear it, from their siblings and their parents, every day.

Tom teaches his children self-defense and how to love fiercely and loyally.

Tom plaits Lily's hair in a gorgeous braid before she goes on her first date, 12 years old, and a light blush dusting her cheeks. He casually threatens her date, a 12-year-old muggle, that he will kill them should they ever, and he means *ever,* hurt his daughter. (He is not lying, he could get away with it). He follows her on the date the whole time, hiding obviously behind potted plants and being generally offensive to self-respecting spies. He sits with her on a red and gold couch when her date is over, undoes her braid with nimble hands, and pretends to be surprised as she recounts every tiny, wonderful detail.

Lily Potter-Black never once begrudges her siblings for their magic and they never once think any less of her for its lack.

Harry makes hot chocolate with his children the muggle way because

it works goddamnit, and they call it the Lily and James special. His mother never got to see him grow up and Harry treasures every moment of watching his children get older: learning how to read, graduating primary school, and going on their first dates.

He remembers his mother saying, “You lived. It was worth everything,” and knows more than he’s ever known anything before that she would love these grandchildren she’ll never get to meet.

So he catalogs every beautiful moment and waits for when he’ll be able to tell her and his father all about them, in person, someday. Lily and James Potter never had the chance to go grey. Their son does.

Harry’s children and their whole generation grow up looking at portraits of heroic Slytherins, meeting the most amazing muggles on common room doors, and laughing in schools where their biggest worries are homework assignments and exams.

When this generation begins having children of their own, they stop worrying about if their kids will be squibs or about the families of muggle-borns. Magic and blood are not and have never been, after all, makers of worth. They think of Petunia Evans and Lily Luna Potter-Black and think, “I should be so lucky to have a child or friend like them.”

Tom Black is remembered as an educator, a headmaster, and a man who loved deeply. His Hufflepuffs credit him with their achievements and the way he looks at Harry ends a few marriages as people ask, "why don't you look at me like that?" He leaves a lasting impact on Hogwarts and ends the stereotype that Hufflepuffs are dumb doormats.

Harry Potter is remembered as a visionary, a loving husband and father, and the best artist to have ever walked this earth. It’s simply

who he was: someone who could wield the pen in his hand like a wand - someone who used canvas and paper to build creations teeming with magic and beauty never before seen.

His masterpieces make the world stop and realize the cost of war. The wizarding world never forgets this war of souls, can never forget, not when the faces of dead students smile at them from every wall. They remember and they stop sending their children into battles. They stop leaving their children behind.

Harry Potter is remembered for paintings so beautiful they give survivors the space to breathe and appreciate and *rest.* There was never a fight bigger than this.

In time, his part in the war fades but his art and its impacts remain.

So yes, when history talks about Harry Potter and Tom Black, this is their legacy.

And the seasons turn year after year. Flowers bloom and wither, winters come and go. Scars fade and stretch with time. Hands stop shaking, wounds heal, memories remain. Children grow up talking to paintings of family they never had the chance to meet. Twin girls with bright red hair blow up priceless school artifacts and keep the memory of their uncle alive. Lavender Brown's daughter catches snowflakes on her tongue and sits on the knees of her mother, thinking she's the most beautiful woman in the world despite the bite mark that takes up half her face.

There is tragedy and there is pain.

There is, also, the victory that comes with remembering how to live again.

END

Chapter End Notes

"There's victory in remembering how to live again" was a line said by Harry in chapter ten.

———

In case you were wondering, that bit about Petunia being in her portrait and becoming the first muggle to come to Hogwarts? I wrote that around chapter three and have been tirelessly waiting to get to the ending so I could share it with all of you. Pretty much everything from chapter four until now was to get to this moment where instead of inheriting war, children inherit peace and acceptance and petunia is someone you can't help but root for.

------ And so it ends -------

The world is going more than a bit wonky these days, so please, reach out to those who need it and those you care about. Reach

out with love and compassion even when you want to lash out or hide away. There is no fight bigger than this.

Thank you to everyone who's still reading this work and who's been with me from the beginning. I never expected this response to my fic. To be honest, I just started this for fun and I've finished two fanfiction and one real book!! already in the time it took me to finish this one. (You should check those out, by the way, the book is called "Dear The Man Upstairs" and the fics are right here if you click on my username in AO3.)

But here we are, at the end of the era. So, for Tom and Harry's sake, leave a comment down below. The internet is forever; forge your own sliver of infinity.

It's been an honor and a privilege to write this story. Thank you all.

Works inspired by this one

Dripping Fingers (and falling in love) by Razorling

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!